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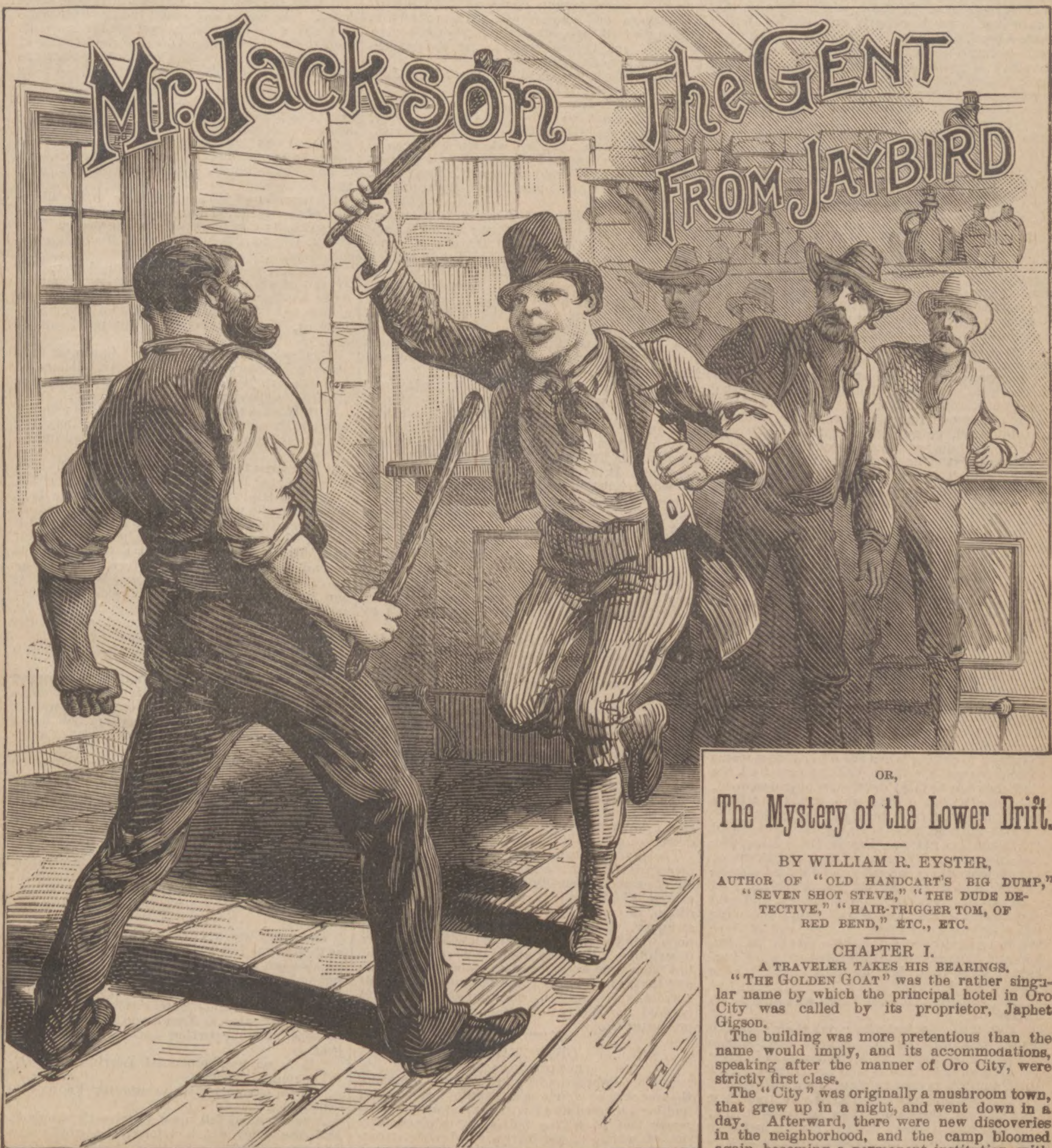
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OR,

The Mystery of the Lower Drift.

BY WILLIAM R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "OLD HANDCART'S BIG DUMP,"
"SEVEN SHOT STEVE," "THE DUDE DE-
TECTIVE," "HAIR-TRIGGER TOM, OF
RED BEND," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A TRAVELER TAKES HIS BEARINGS.
"THE GOLDEN GOAT" was the rather singular name by which the principal hotel in Oro City was called by its proprietor, Japhet Gigson.
The building was more pretentious than the name would imply, and its accommodations, speaking after the manner of Oro City, were strictly first class.
The "City" was originally a mushroom town, that grew up in a night, and went down in a day. Afterward, there were new discoveries in the neighborhood, and the camp bloomed again, becoming a permanent institution, with more prosperity than the average.

THE IRISH PARD OF THE GENT FROM JAYBIRD WAS MASTER OF CEREMONIES NOW.

Gigson was one of the oldest citizens. He had made money hand over fist, from the start; and though in proportion to the capital invested perhaps he was not doing as well as when in the canvas-roofed shanty where he began business, he had no reason to be dissatisfied with the profits from his really fine structure at the center of the town, which was alike the headquarters of travel and speculation, all under the same management. In the center of the building was the hotel and the stage station, while in one corner was located a bank, and in another a store for general merchandise.

On a warm afternoon in August, not many years ago, the stage brought a load of passengers, mostly strangers, and business at the Golden Goat was brisker even than usual. That evening the office was quite crowded, and among the new arrivals was a youngish looking fellow, who had written down his name as "Lawrence Lorrimer, San Francisco."

Oro City had outgrown its disgust at the sight of a "plug hat" or a "biled shirt," so that there was little danger of a well-dressed man exciting any unfavorable criticism, so long as he confined his appearance to the hotel, and to the strictly business parts of the town; though there were places, perhaps, where it would have been inexpedient for Mr. Lorrimer to have made a first appearance. He was neatly dressed in a loose-fitting suit of linen, and wore a soft, broad-brimmed hat, neatly fitting boots on what were rather small feet, while his hands were incased in kid gloves of a lavender tint and reaching well up his wrists. His hair, which was a chestnut-brown, curled crisply around his well-shaped head, and his eyes were black and sharp. As he lounged up to the office desk, with a step that had a pantherish grace, Chet Palmer, the clerk, looked him over for the second time, and again came to the conclusion that the new arrival was something of a dude, and a great deal of a gambler.

Perhaps he was right in both conclusions.

At the desk Lorrimer turned around, and leisurely surveyed the crowd, looking up from under the broad brim of his hat, which somewhat shaded his face.

Of course there was a bar-room attached to the hotel, but that was adjacent to the office, and was reached through a couple of folding doors, at present partially closed. Men went out and men came in, so there was a constant stream, flowing in both directions; and, exclusive of strangers, it was composed of some of the very best citizens of the town.

After a little, Lorrimer turned to the clerk, and in an undertone asked him a question, at the same time making an almost imperceptible gesture.

Chet was supposed to have four pairs of eyes in his head, and proved himself equal to the emergency. With a short laugh, not loud enough to reach beyond the ears for which it was intended, he pushed around the register, which was almost at the elbow of the inquirer.

"Some of the boys call him Previous Pete, though I don't fancy he would relish it if you struck him straight with that handle. There is the way he writes it down when he does it himself."

With a single motion he turned over a couple of pages, and placed his finger on a line. Glancing over his shoulder Lorrimer read:

"Mr. Jackson—from Jaybird."

The words were plainly written, in a flowing, easy hand.

"Mr. Jackson, eh! Where does the rest of it come in at? I should not suppose he had been here long enough to put the good people to the trouble of hunting him up a *nom de nique*."

"Nick-name? Well. It does seem to fit. He has only been here a week, and in that time has had a couple of rackets. The first was about Miss Minnie, one of the young ladies who wait on the table. That was all right. For a man that likes to chip in when the other fellow seems to hold the cards, and be willing to meet all the bluff that can be piled up, the opening was good, and there wasn't a man who would not have been willing to pat his back and say, go it."

"But the next time was something else. Old Bill Binks bought the Dandy Belle Mine, fair and square. If it was salted that was business, and his lookout. The gent from Jaybird seemed to think that it was his, and put an oar in. And then, old Billy rose right up on his ear, and said that he was of age, and that whether the mine was salted or not he was satisfied, and if there was to be any shooting done it would be between him and the man who interfered with his bargain. After that, Mr. Jackson couldn't have much to say."

"No, hardly. If Billy Binks was able to afford—"

"But that was just the point the gentleman made. Old Billy put his last cent into the hole in the ground, and tumbled a mortgage in after it. He has been here a year or more, working hard, and it was something of a surprise to find out that his pile was as big as it was, though it didn't break the bank when he drew it out. Whether it will break his heart when he learns where it is gone to is what we are all waiting to find out. But, meantime, Previous Pete will not

be so likely to chip in the next time he sees a one-sided trade on the carpet. It was a joke on him, and no mistake."

"But, perhaps Mr. Binks is not as big a fool as he looks. There may be money in the mine, after all."

"You bet there is none, or Abel Kain would never have sold out. When he gets his hand on anything that's good he keeps it there. He has had a finger in half the small ventures around here, and a good deal to say about the larger ones. A sharp one is he, and you needn't forget it."

"I shall not. As a rule I forget nothing. How did Kain take the interference?"

Chet scratched the end of his nose dubiously, and was a little slow about answering. When he did speak it was with something like reluctance. It was a private conversation, without the least chance of being overheard, but he did not seem to care to express his opinions openly, while they were too strong to keep to himself when there was a safe occasion to air them.

"That is just what I was thinking of. You see, it was not safe for him to make many loose remarks before he got his gun out, for the Gent from Jaybird is just lightning on the draw, as we had occasion to observe when he downed Sweet William in the affair about the young lady. And though Jackson was not flourishing any firearms, his pard was standing back in good covering distance; and if he had tried to take one I guess it is pretty sure that he would have had his hands full with the other. But, somehow, when a man opens up the ball with Kain there are generally afterclaps; and it strikes me that the sport is a man who will have some bad luck before very long, if the prayers of Abel Kain can avail much."

"Hum! Just so. And the Gent from Jaybird has a pard? What is he like."

"Well, perhaps I pitched it a little too strong. It's not so sure that they are pards, though they travel together. He is quite Oirish, and a bad little man on wheels, who has a record of his own. They may be friends, or they may be master and man; but, at any rate, though he does not board here, they are never very far apart."

"Thanks, awfully; but I am not interested enough to wait for him. I was struck by the appearance of Jackson—and there was something familiar about it too—but I had no idea of being inquisitive when I spoke. One must get in the evening somehow. There are lots of people here; but for a stranger it is lonesome, all the same. Guess I will take a turn around the town, and then retire. The jaunt to-day was a hard one, and I don't feel brilliant enough to try to make any acquaintances. Much obliged for your information."

"Oh, you are welcome. We always lay out to do what we can for our guests—even to giving them advice, when they don't think they need it. Fact is, if I were you I would not make my first trip around town at night; and I would go a little slow until I got somewhat acquainted. It is not the worst place of its size in the world, but there are some tough cases here, who might be willing to give a bit of trouble to a stranger, especially if he was alone. Sorry that I cannot offer to see you around, but to-night there is no one to take my place. Tomorrow night, the old man will be back, and I will then be happy to show you the lions, and the nearest approach to an elephant which Oro City can trot out. After that, you will know what is what, and will have some friends to boot."

"Thanks again; but I think I understand the situation, and will look after my interests pretty sharply. I have been in mining towns before this, and—well, I am here, alive."

He smiled as he spoke, and then nodded a good-by. Before Chet could make any further or stronger protest, he was moving away from the desk.

"Let him go," thought Chet, following the stranger with a curious stare. "Somehow I have an idea that he is better than he looks, and there is no need to worry over him, even if I have taken a fancy to him at first sight. Funny how I had to reel it off to him. Perhaps he is a detective, after all!"

The advice certainly had not troubled Lorrimer a particle. He was strolling down the main street as unconcerned as if he owned the whole city, and had a police army at his back. In addition, he moved along not altogether like a stranger. If he had not already some acquaintance with the town, he knew something of it by description. He went along carelessly enough, but from time to time gave a glance to this side and that, as if to note if the landmarks were all correct, and finally turned at an open door, and entered the Ready John Saloon without pause or hesitation.

CHAPTER II. SUDDEN DEATH.

If Chet Palmer had seen their guest entering that saloon, he would have thought his warning had been thrown away with a vengeance. Lorrimer had passed by half a dozen places, any one of which should have seemed more attractive to a man of his stamp, but finally had pull-

ed up at about the toughest spot in town for a stranger to visit.

The character of the place ought to have been visible the moment a man passed the doorway. Not that it was dingy or squalid. Everything was new and clean; but the crowd gathered there was a boisterous one; every man there seemed to have his nature, and that an evil one; written on his face. Some were drinking, some were gambling, and one man, who was lying on a bench, groaned deeply from time to time, while the bandages, that were splotted with blood, showed that he had been wounded badly in a difficulty of some kind or other which had evidently occurred not so long ago.

The majority of those present were too busy with their own affairs to at once notice the stranger; but as he strolled across the floor a man here and there looked up at him with an evil eye, and before he reached the bar he caused a living current, small, but distinctly visible, to set in the same direction.

All this appeared to be unnoticed by Lorrimer. He nodded slightly to the burly individual who was scowling at him from behind the bar, and though the salutation was not returned he did not hesitate to speak.

"Good-evening! I am looking for a man known as Saintly Sam, and was told that it would be more than likely I could find him here. As he is a stranger to me, if he is in the room will you please let me know, and point him out? It will be to his advantage for him to meet me, and so, probably, to yours."

"Well, I'll be blessed, stranger, but ye'r a cool hand. The Ready John ain't the place ter come and ask questions, an' so yer ort ter know it. But, under tier circumstances, I don't mind ef I do answer a few, er so. Yes, Saintly Sam are hyer, but I wouldn't advise yer goin' too near him. He's off color jest now, an' them as don't like him might take a notion ter hate you. An' ef yer bothers Sam, I guess he'll be more apt ter answer with lead than with his tongue. To be sure he looks kinder weakly, but he hez ter be purty bad when he can't pick a trigger ter down a dude thet comes a-botherin'. That's him, thar."

He turned and jabbed his finger in the direction of the wounded man on the bench, and then as suddenly let his eyes rest again on Lorrimer, as if to note how he was affected by the information.

"Thanks, awfully," returned the latter. "I am not afraid that he will pick trigger, but he looks as though he might die before I have a chance to have my talk out. If you have no objections, I will see what I can make out of him."

This was said so coolly that it almost took away the breath of the bar bully. Before he had time to frame an answer, Lorrimer was crossing to the side of the wounded man.

Saintly Sam might be a saint, but his practice was hardly up to his profession. As Lorrimer drew near he varied his groans with an imprecation.

"You seem to be in trouble, my friend. Can I do anything for you?"

Quite softly spoke the stranger, as he bent down over the wounded man.

To him the address was both a surprise and a shock. For answer he suddenly raised himself to a sitting posture, without a thought of his wound, and stared into the face of the young man. The look was savage and searching; if the young man had quailed, it would have been no wonder.

Then the leaden lips framed a response, which was delivered with a ghastly grin.

"You kin git me a coffin, fur, stranger, I'm a dead man!"

Even while he spoke the wounded man began to sink backward, while his face put on a ghastly look. There was an ominous sound in his throat—a rattle such as Lorrimer had heard before, but never save from the throat of a dying man.

Such a result as this was the last thing he desired or expected. The voice which but a moment ago had uttered the curse, had not been so weak; the little exertion ought hardly to have caused such a sudden change.

Lorrimer sprang forward, and bent by Sam's side, raising his head slightly with one hand while he drew a small flask with the other. Opening it with his teeth, he put the mouth of the flask to the lips of the wounded man, and made a vain effort to have him taste the contents.

The result was a weak cough, a choking gasp, as though the few drops which passed between Sam's teeth were strangling him. Then, the jaw suddenly dropped, the eyes remained fixed upon Lorrimer with a dead stare through the film which appeared to be gathering on them, while the whole frame stiffened, and the head which he was still supporting became as heavy as lead.

"It is no use," muttered Lorrimer, quietly.

"The man is dead."

"Then, stranger, we wants ter know who killed him."

A heavy hand fell upon Lorrimer's shoulder, and the voice which uttered the words was harsh and angry.

"Who killed him? How should I know?" asked Lorrimer, slipping lightly from under the hand just as the fingers were about to gather his collar into its grip.

"That bit of amusement was over before I came in, and as I am a stranger I would not have been able to say much about it, even if I had been here."

The fellow gave a scornful laugh, as he looked around at the men who were crowding up to see what had happened. He was rough and tough, no doubt, and his face had a more brutal look than even that of Ready John, the proprietor of the place. His laugh was echoed by half a dozen of the nearest, and then he took up the thread of his discourse.

"We dunno who it war thet fired ther shot—but it come from the outside. W'ot's ther matter with it bein' your shootin'-iron ez made ther hole in Sam's buzzom? An' we'd like ter know w'ot that are ye war tryin' ter git betwixt his lips. It war ther lead ez brought him up to ther edge ov ther ridge; but it war ther thing in that flask w'ot pushed him over—an' mebbe I didn't see yer a-givin' it to him?"

"Don't be a fool, man," coolly retorted Lorrimer. "As near as I can make out, I was in the Golden Goat when that shot was fired. I came straight from there here, and I heard nothing of it as I came along. And as for the flask—it holds nothing more deadly than whisky, pure and simple. I saw that the man had suddenly collapsed, and was trying to revive him. It was too late, though; for which I am heartily sorry. My loss in the matter is certainly greater than yours; and, I suspect, my sorrow is a great deal deeper."

"Mebbe yes, an' mebbe no; but I reckon that yarn won't go down hyer, unless it kin be proved a heap sight truer than it looks. Thar ain't ther straight whisky goin' ez could choke Sainly Sam, dead er livin', an' we ez know him hez our suspishuns ez ther' might be suthin' warmer than real corn juice in that bottle. Mebbe you would be willin' ter prove ye'r' right by drinkin' w'ot's left. Ef it's whisk' it won't hurt yer; an' ef it's suthin' else—guess yer won't git more ner than yer d'serves. I am givin' it to yer straight, young man, an' fur ver own good. Ef I know ary thing about Oro ther prospects for a necktie party are good, unless yer does suthin' ter calm ther boys. It's yer own whisk' we are a-askin' yer ter drink—put it down."

"And who are you, that you seem to consider yourself judge, jury and executioner, all rolled into one? A man may carry half a pint of whisky for an emergency, and yet not care to swallow it on compulsion. It might not kill, but I am very sure it would give you the satisfaction of seeing me drunk as a lord, a thing I don't propose shall happen—not this evening at least."

"Don't be too sure, young man. My name are Sweet William when ther boys want ter talk about me, an' that's good ernuf a handle tell a better one are needed. You don't seem ter see thet ye'r' in a heap ov danger, er maybe yer wouldn't crow so loud. We bin a-watchin' yer ever sence yer come in, but we didn't think yer would hev ther nerve ter finish yer work hyer afore all ther crowd, er we'd put er stopper on in time. Ef so be yer gits drunk yer will hev ther comfort ov dyin' happy, fur it's a purty clear case; an' I kin tell yer ye'r' bound ter swing."

Was all this in sober earnest, and did the crowd suppose that he had anything to do with the death of Sainly Sam, or was it a grim joke, to try his nerve?

Lorrimer asked himself the questions, though he was none the less paying strict attention to what was going on around him. Jest or earnest, there was danger for him there, and it behoved him to be on his guard. When a rough gang insists on a man drinking at the bar, without giving any reason save their own royal will, it is quite a serious task to evade the invitation. Here, and insisted on under the plea advanced by Sweet William, a fight was pretty certain to follow the refusal; and a fight was something which Lawrence Lorrimer was not yearning for, in spite of the off-hand way in which he had answered.

"That is your idea, is it? Well, it is not mine. I have seen such scenes as that, but it was in rush camps, where there was no law, and three men out of four wanted to be lawless. In Oro I fancy the public at large will have something to say about your diversions when you try to carry them too far. One murder ought to satisfy you for the night. If not, bunt around for some more appropriate victim, and don't attempt to carry the joke too far with one whose only fault is that he was trying to save the man who, somehow, among you all, you have managed to murder."

Very boldly did Lorrimer speak, and at the same time looked straight into the eyes of Sweet William. If he recognized that there was danger for him there he was evidently prepared to face it.

The effect of look and words was unexpectedly great! The rough fell back a pace, and braced himself as though he had received a blow that was both heavy and unexpected. For an in-

stant there was a look of positive fear on his ugly countenance; and though the recovery which followed was rapid and complete, it did not deceive Lorrimer. He saw that he had struck harder than he knew, at the time, and that by chance he had stumbled upon the secret of who had caused the death of Sainly Sam!

Yet he understood, at the same time, that it was a disadvantage to him if there was terrible truth in his words. Had his random charge not come so near the mark it would have elicited only a laugh; but now, it was more than likely this man, and any other men who trained at his bidding, would feel certain that he held the dangerous secret, and would be desperate enough to attempt his murder, even if they had not thought of it before. And the next speech of Sweet William showed that this was the right inference.

"All right. So you think, young man. Ez you won't drink, you kin croak. At him, boys! He killed poor Sam!"

The attack was as sudden as it was savage, and though Sweet William led, there were half a dozen behind him.

CHAPTER III.

THE RIOT AT THE READY JOHN.

LAWRENCE LORRIMER was not built after the model of a prize-fighter, and if he had been it would have seemed little less than madness to attempt to resist that rush, if it kept up as it began.

An ugly crowd it was, which came for him, and though no weapons were visible it was likely enough that they would be produced before the affair was over. Without a doubt, every man was well heeled. Fair play for a stranger at the Ready John was something which had never been heard of; and the roughs who trained there were prone to the use of knife and pistol in preference to nature's weapons.

For half a minute chance had opened a lane to the door, through which the stranger might possibly have dashed in safety if he could have made up his mind to retreat, but, instead, Lorrimer drew himself up resolutely, and as Sweet William came within reaching distance, he struck out.

Sweet William went down like a nine-pin, that had been bowled over by a pony ball; and Danny Duke, who was seldom far behind his pard, dropped alongside of him from a second stroke.

Without a doubt it was the surprise of the season, for the blows did not seem to have the steam to produce such effects; but they were delivered with a neatness and precision that showed the young man to be possessed of no mean science; and when he recovered himself, and stood once more on guard, his head bent downward over his breast, and his eyes darting around the room in search of new assailants, he made a picture which even the prejudiced minds could not help but admire. The enforced halt continued until the stranger should have a chance to dispose of the two men in hand.

Danny Duke appeared to be pretty well out of the game, but Sweet William, though dazed, was still vicious.

When he recovered his feet it was to stagger backward half-way across the room, and then halt, with his hand to his belt, while he glared across at Lorrimer. As the weapon came from its place he stepped still further back, so as to be out of the way, and then raised it to a level.

Sweet William was quivering, but it was more from anger than hurt. If he did not pull trigger at once—it was because he wanted to make sure of his aim.

When Lorrimer saw him it looked as though it was too late. The hand of the tough never wavered, his weapon was in perfect line, and his finger already touched the trigger. A little pressure, and the end must come.

The pressure did not come in time. There was a loud crash as the pistol exploded; but no damage was done. William's feet were suddenly knocked from under him, and again he measured his length on the floor, his back striking with an awful crash. And, none too soon was it, either, for the rest of the crowd had only halted to give William an opportunity to get in his work. When the rough drew his pistol every one else followed suit, and though the others waited, feeling it a point of honor to allow him the first shot, they were ready to go on when he failed.

"Quite a circus, I must confess; and this gent seems to be well up in the ground-and-lofty-tumbling act," said a not unmelodious voice, the owner of which was looking keenly around as he spoke.

"It is a game in which I generally join when I think I see an opening, and every time I want to play ringmaster. If any one else wants to crack the whip, I will hear his reasons; but it strikes me that the Gent from Jaybird is about the man for the occasion, and he is willing to argue the point according to the logic of Oro City, or any other town of its size and bearing."

A little high-flown the speech for the men who made the Ready John their headquarters, but there was no danger that he would not be understood. And the Gent from Jaybird was so

well known in the town that he seemed to have an acknowledged right to at least a respectful hearing. Half a dozen men had drawn revolvers, with an idea of using them in the case of Lawrence Lorrimer, but they were not ready to turn them at once against this other man, though he had stepped so carelessly between them and their prey.

In the momentary hush that followed the general defiance, Lawrence gave a quick glance at the man who had come to his support. The appearance of Mr. Jackson had already attracted his attention, and was firmly fixed in his mind, but it was only natural to want to see whether Mr. Jackson in action looked the same as Mr. Jackson in repose.

There was no change. If anything, he looked more unconcerned than when he had been leaning against the wall in the office of the Golden Goat. Yet there was something about his eyes which revealed the fact that he was always on the alert, and if there seemed to be the need for it he could spring into action without a second's warning.

The way he had just flung a man of apparently greater size to the floor showed that he was possessed of wonderful strength; and a second look would have told a stranger of the least judgment in such matters that here was a man "built from the ground up."

Mr. Jackson was neither tall nor stout, neither fleshy nor lean, and his hands and feet were alike slender and shapely. His head was rather small, and his shoulders sloping, which, perhaps, was the reason why no one in the room would have guessed within twenty pounds of his weight. His hair was closely cut, and black, like his eyes, while his fresh-looking face was clean shaven, save for the long, pointed mustache, which shaded his resolute mouth so much as to conceal, or change, the real expression of his face. He was dressed in a suit of tweed that fitted him to perfection—so well in fact that it seemed hard to believe there were any weapons concealed about him, and certainly none were visible.

Lawrence gave but one glance, and once more took all this in.

Then he had something to say for himself.

"Excuse me, sir, but if your desire to join in the performance arises from any idea that the present—or late—master of ceremonies cannot do justice to my act, I assure you I am perfectly content with the way things are, or were, arranged, and was perfectly sure of being able to finish amidst wild applause. If, however, you want to occupy the ring all by yourself, in case the audience are willing, I will retire for the present. I have no desire to have my little specialty gayed by undesired assistance."

Quite sharply was this spoken, and if Mr. Jackson had been of the sort who show emotion under any circumstances he would probably have looked as though some one had slapped him in the face.

Instead, he answered heartily:

"That's the platform *exactly*! The sooner you retire the better—before you have to slaughter all these lambs, that are just getting ready to turn into so many wolves if they can see a chance to get some good work in. I know something about them, and how to take them; but you are a stranger, and I might hold the banner a trifle too high, or forget to start a hole in the balloons. Yes, stranger, run along! This is my circus, as I said before, and I think I hear the band getting ready to strike up for the next act. Clear the ring before the curtain rises!"

The latter part of this speech was made in the midst of some hubbub.

Sweet William was a veritable glutton, as Mr. Jackson had opportunity once before to observe; and now he was again on deck. Several friends had raised him from the floor and placed him on his feet, for there was no special damage apparent, outside of the fact that he was gasping for breath, and too full of wrath for utterance. His first recognizable expression was:

"Gimme my pistol!"

A willing hand thrust it into his grasp; then he strode forward, and confronted the Gent from Jaybird.

"It's ther second time he's run hisself inter my affairs, but I reckon it'll be ther last!" he shouted as he came, and then threw up his hand and pulled the trigger.

"Bliss yer sowl, that depinds!" said a rollicking voice that had in it a touch of the real Irish brogue.

"It's provokin' be is, wid his t'azin' way av settin' things roight whin he thinks they're goin' wrong; but sure it's his nature, an' av ye don't want him lookin' your way, it's no affairs ye ought to have, at all, at all. Itherwise, it's till ther ind av toime he'll be carryin' on afther ther same owld way, an' Oi'll be kapein' on breakin' me back wid helpin' him out av his troubles an' tribulations. Dennis an' his sthick come to ther frint, as nathural as loife, an' twice ez handsome."

Dennis and his "sthick" had arrived in the very nick of time, indeed. There was no question but what Sweet William had been on murder intent; and without some outside interruption it might have fared badly enough with the

Gent from Jaybird; but the stick swung upward, and caught the wrist of the rough just as he was most certain of his victim. So narrow a thing was it that the bullet touched the crown of Mr. Jackson's tile; but the next instant the weapon was flying in the air, while Sweet William was shaking his wrist, and howling with surprise and pain.

"Thanks, Dennis!" calmly said Jackson, totally unmoved by the danger he had so narrowly escaped.

"He has had his shot at me, and by all the rules of square dealing I can take mine at him when I get ready. At the same time, I don't like to crowd my luck too hard, but I don't think I will wait so long again. Look out for yourself, though. The big brute will be apt to come back at you when he gets done howling. He seems to be unfortunate about the panning out of his good intentions, yet, all the same, I think he is a bad man, with the word spelled with a capital B. There are also other bad men here, who look as though they would like to take a hand in the game. Now, sir, what troubles you?"

The question was addressed to Ready John, who was pushing forward, fire in his eye, and a stick every whit as big as that of Dennis, in his hand.

The fact was, the saloon-keeper had been allowing events to shape themselves without his interference, for the diversions of Sweet William were generally allowed to run along unchecked at the Ready John. The two toughs were known to be pards to a certain extent.

"Nothin' troubles me; but you'll find this stick giving you a heap of bother if you don't get out of this before I can swing it around yer nob. Three of you to one, on Bill, is a little more than I can stand back and see, though I'm as willing as any man to let strangers have their fun. Git, or drop!" And he swung his bludgeon around his head until it whistled.

"Hillo to glory!" shouted Dennis, springing in front of him, and flourishing his own stick as vigorously. "Here's a mon ter mate me wid a shillalah, an' ther'll be more foon than whin dad doled. Have at yez, ye spalpeen! Tickle me wid yer sthick an' you'll make me shmoile all over!"

CHAPTER IV.

"WID SPRIGS AV SHILLALAH."

DENNIS gave Mr. Jackson no chance at all, though that gentleman had attempted to open the ball with the proprietor immediately upon his appearance. Without waiting for answer he leaped forward, and between the two, but before the Gent from Jaybird could interfere, or say a word, there was such a rattling of sticks as the walls of that saloon had never before heard.

The action of the little Irishman was unexpected, and apparently the height of rashness, but the fact was, no scheme could better secure the present safety of Mr. Jackson. A battle with cudgels, by men who knew how to use them, was not to be seen every night, and was a safer thing to look at than a row when pistols were in hand. When Ready John threw himself on guard, without other answer than a low growl, a ring was formed as though by magic, and, in place of the savage shouts that would have been rising, there was a chorus of laughing voices, cheering on the two combatants. Sweet William was for the time forgotten; and the men who were about to take up his quarrel were willing that a postponement should be moved until after the passage at arms by the two experts.

The Gent from Jaybird gave a sigh of resignation, stepped back a pace or two, with folded arms, and watched the affair with a lazy interest. He knew well enough that it would be impossible to make Dennis listen to any suggestion of his until some one had given or taken a few hard knocks.

And there were plenty of those same knocks going, though for a time they were taken altogether by the sticks. It was a little hard to tell from his face what he really did think about it; but those who knew him best were satisfied that Ready John was enjoying himself every bit as much as was the Irishman, and that was saying a good deal.

There was a marked difference in the two men, however.

The saloon proprietor was as silent and stolid as though he was a piece of machinery. Not a sound passed his lips, and though he moved from this side to that with surprising swiftness he did it in an automatic way that concealed the speed of his movements.

Dennis, on the contrary, was all alive. He flourished his stick with an easy grace which was lacking in the movements of the other. Now here and now there it darted, seemingly behind him as often as in front; yet always ready to catch a stroke when Ready John attempted to deliver it. And in time to the flourish of his shillalah, and the rattle of the blows, Dennis danced a lively Irish jig, putting in his steps as correctly as though he had the floor to himself, and there was a band playing for his

accommodation, while all the while he was keeping up a running fire of comment, after the line he had used when he first faced his antagonist.

The Irish pard of the Gent from Jaybird was master of ceremonies now.

"An' that toime Oi found yez!" he exclaimed, as his stick fairly landed on the head of Ready John.

"Sure, an' ther foon is joost beginnin'. Whin all both av us are dhrippin' wid gore, an' the heads av us are daycintly cbracked, it's thin we kin shlape wid ther good conscience, an' ther happiniss av ther angels. Not this toime, Mither John!" he added, as the saloon-keeper almost succeeded in landing a desperate stroke on his crown.

"An'ither toime will do better; an' fur ther prisint Oi'll kape the foon all on ther wan soide."

As he spoke he sprung lightly back, although the blow had already been warded.

The movement brought him within a few feet of Mr. Jackson, where he stood as though watching for the recovery of his antagonist, who had swung partly around from the force of his own blow. Even had some one been watching them closely he would have hardly been able to see the lips of the Irishman move, as he muttered in an undertone:

"Av ye love me, leave! Whin he gits on to me stoyle he'll down me, an' murther you!"

The appeal, if such it was meant for, produced a contrary effect to what Dennis had hoped. Ready John was taking a fresh hold on his weapon, and there was a chance for an apt word which Mr. Jackson did not allow to slip by unimproved.

"Even money, John, that my friend gets the best of you with his club; and you can name the size of the figure. As a sport you ought to make it a big one, and all the limit I ask is the size of my pile."

The challenge was one which Ready John was not inclined to pass unnoticed; and while he spoke Dennis was again muttering his warning:

"For ther love av heavin, look afther ther ither mon. They have foll'ed him out, an' ther nixt thing will be murther."

"Finish your man, first!" was the terse rejoinder, given in the same undertone, while aloud he responded:

"A hundred be it, though that is rather a pitiful ante for the boss of the Ready John to suggest. Suppose we play that Dennis holds the age, and I come in with a straddle. And I'd like it all the better if you let me come in with a thousand."

"If you don't like the style of the house you kin go out. No one is keeping you here, and this gent an' I kin enjoy ourselves jest ez well ef ther' ain't a cent on ther outcome," growled back the proprietor, tightening his grip on his stick preparatory to a forward move.

"Blamed if I don't!" retorted Mr. Jackson, with a readiness which took the other by surprise. "If there is no money in it I can't say that I care for this kind of a diversion. Dennis can bring that hundred around to the Golden Goat, after the affair is over. Give the boy fair play or you will be bearing from me before morning. So long! You can proceed with your diversions."

And actually, without a restraining word or gesture, Mr. Jackson was not only allowed to retire but he took advantage of the opportunity, and swung himself out of the door without any apparent concern as to the fate of his friend.

The eyes of Ready John had not been as sharp as those of Dennis, and he had not observed the movement of which the Irishman had spoken, or he might not have made the suggestion on which the sport had so promptly withdrawn.

"I don't know that I have any call to fight his battles, especially as he has more than hinted that he wanted to be let alone. Yet, as I chipped in to back his game, I may as well see the hand played out, and if I didn't, I suppose Dennis would be disappointed. I am not so sure but what he is in the biggest scrape of the two, but as he seems to enjoy that sort of nonsense, no matter who gets the beating, I may as well gratify him. I will try and see what has become of our young friend, at all events. If he is in no danger I can reconsider, and return."

Mr. Jackson stepped out swiftly after leaving the saloon. Although he had no reason to suppose that Lawrence had gone on down the street—it would have been more natural to suppose that he had returned to the hotel, or to one of the better class of saloons, which lay in that direction—he turned off to the right by instinct, and a moment later saw the reason for so doing.

"If he goes in the other direction, they will hardly dare to try a hack at him. Too much light and bustle. There would not be a bit of use in my following. He might be crowded pretty hard, if they are men of nerve, but he would have a chance to hold his own."

"But if they went on down this way, into the darkness, there is no telling what sort of a game they might put up on him. They would have every chance in the world to have things all their own way."

As he went along, Mr. Jackson looked sharply to the right and the left. He could see, after a fashion, quite a distance down the street, but no one was in sight answering to the description of the parties he was looking for. There had hardly been time enough for all hands to get out of sight if they had gone straight ahead, so Mr. Jackson concluded that they had turned aside to the right or the left.

"Don't see anything of them," muttered the sport, after a little. "If they were following him up to attack him from behind they ought not to be out of sight. Perhaps they had an idea where he was bound for, and have run on by a flank movement, to lay an ambush. In that case I may miss them after all. There's a chance that he is striking for Ramah's cabin, which is about the only thing out in this direction for a man to visit; but for a stranger who has not been in the burg half a dozen hours, I don't see how he would know of it, or what he would want there. I'll try it; and if I slip up on that, he will have to fight his own battles, unless he knows how to yell, and makes his lungs do their duty when they open up the attack."

Mr. Jackson was a new-comer, but he was no stranger, in Oro City. The cabin of Ramah, of which he had spoken, was just beyond the thinly settled outskirts of the town, and there was an elegant chance for an ambush at more than one point on the road thither. Without hesitation, the Gent from Jaybird began to cut across lots to reach the nearest of these.

As he went, he laughed to himself. The situation was ludicrous, and no one knew it better than he; yet, instinct was strong, and a thing that he seldom fought. It said, go ahead; and he went.

He had not lost a moment; and it was just as well. He actually discerned, after a little, the figure of Lawrence Lorrimer, not very far ahead of him—and then he saw two or three dark figures rise up from the shadows, and leap toward the young man.

CHAPTER V.

MR. JACKSON CALLS FOR ANOTHER HAND.

MR. JACKSON was too far away to be of any service against that first rush, save that he uttered a warning cry, which undoubtedly reached the ears for which it was intended. Quick as a flash the young man wheeled and threw himself on guard.

There was little time for scientific display, and none for some of the hard hitting which had been in the saloon. Probably he heard the steps as he wheeled, and knew that his assailants were on him, for he threw both hands up perpendicularly in front of him, his arms sloping outward a little, so as to guard his head, even though it might be at the risk of broken bones.

The movement happened to be the best he could have made. The attack seemed to have been made to capture, and not to hurt. Two pair of hands were reaching for Lorrimer, and his instinctive guard was just in time to throw aside the fingers that otherwise would have closed on his clothing. Then he stooped, and sprung, dodging under the outstretched arm on either side of him, and plumped his head with the force of a battering-ram into the stomach of a third man who was a pace or two in the rear of the others.

The counter-attack was so unexpected, and so rapid that the rough, who was holding himself in reserve, though with little thought that his services would be needed, went down in a heap. It was only a chance that he got a grip on Lorrimer's collar as he fell, and took him along with him.

For about half a minute there was a confusion of events that was really bewildering. Lorrimer was as active as a squirrel, and seemed to be made of spring-steel. The clutch on his collar was something he could not at once shake off, for it clung there like a drowning man's grip; but there was not the least chance given to the rough to rise, or to get a further advantage, and though the other toughs turned and looked for an opening it was not so easy to find it. One of them thought he saw one, and was stooping over the two strugglers when the heel of a neatly made boot struck him wickedly on the bridge of the nose, and sent him reeling backward with the blood streaming.

The fellow clapped one hand to the injured member, and when he had fairly recovered the balance which had been all but lost, hopped around for a pace or two, gurgling up some wicked words, that are not found together in the dictionary, though he made them a sort of compound affair that might have been taken for one word.

His movement was unfortunate, for it brought him directly in the path of the Gent from Jaybird, who was coming up on a run, and who slung out his fist straight as an arrow, and as hard as a sledge-hammer blow.

This time the man went down for keeps, without an idea of what had struck him, and it was fully ten minutes before he opened his eyes again, and muttered something about thunder, blazes, and the kick of a mule.

Mr. Jackson never halted to see the result of the stroke, but went right on to the man who was dancing around the rolling combatants, too much interested in trying to secure a hold to note what had just happened to his companion. The first thing he knew of the new element in the game was a rise in the air, just after Mr. Jackson had caught him, neck and thigh. Then began a yell of surprise, which was suddenly squelched in the very middle as the tough came to the ground flat on his back, and with a force which knocked the wind completely out of him. He had been thrown a regular "burster," and was out of the game likewise.

This left Mr. Jackson's hands free to attend to Lorrimer and the third man of the gang.

It was high time, too, for weight was beginning to tell, and it looked as though, ere another minute, Lawrence would have the worst of it. He had not been able to strike to any advantage, and his antagonist was almost on his feet, and holding on with a grip impossible to break.

The Gent from Jaybird lost no time in getting his own hands into the game. He simply encircled the throat of the burly ruffian with his two hands, and then tightened the squeeze. He was perfectly cool, and thoroughly aware of the fact that he had the game in his own hands, so that there was not the least danger of overdoing the thing, or of making the squeeze not quite tight enough. He saw Lorrimer scramble to his feet, and look around in a bewildered sort of way, while breathing heavily, but he said nothing.

When he had his man just at the right state of insensibility, he loosened his grip, and allowed the ruffian to drop heavily to the ground.

The one had disposed of the three without much trouble, and he looked as though he might have done it just as easily even if he had not had the advantage of the surprise in his favor.

As Lorrimer did not speak, though ample time was afforded him to recover his breath, Mr. Jackson began to think it might be in his place to say something. He remembered the rebuff at the saloon, well enough, but he was one of those singular individuals who do not take offense at words that are not directly shaped as an insult, unless it seems to be for their interest or amusement to do so. He spoke in pretty much the same strain as before, and it may have been that he had a little curiosity to find out whether he would be answered after the same fashion.

"Here we are again, Mr. Merriman! Seems as though we are bound to come together in the same ring, so there is no use to grumble about it. They meant business, pard, and, though you were holding your own pretty well, they were playing the advantages for all they were worth. I saw that before I ventured to chip in. I thought that perhaps you would pardon me for calling for a hand when I saw that the odds were too heavy for a square man to buck against, all by himself, alone."

"Don't speak of it," was the answer, given in a tone more cordial than Mr. Jackson had expected.

"I am afraid I was hasty in what I said at the saloon, but the fact was that I was both upset and put out at what had happened. Usually, I do not allow trifles to bother me, but the death of that fellow, just when I had succeeded in finding him, was as provoking as it was unfortunate. Accept my thanks for your friendly interference, both there and here. Had it not been for your warning shout, I would have been taken entirely unawares; and, even if I had been on my guard, it might have gone hard with me. The wretches meant business."

"Yes. They followed you out from the Ready John, and I was very much afraid they would get in their work before I could come across them. But, who are they? We may as well have a glimpse of their mugs, so that we will know them the next time we see them."

"Have a care!" exclaimed Lorrimer, as he saw Mr. Jackson light a match, and carelessly bend over the nearest of the fallen three. "They may not be as harmless as they look, and I judge they are not of the kind to hesitate at a foul stroke, or a shot in the back."

"No danger of that, for a few minutes at least. I got in my work at my leisure, and can calculate to a dot how long it will be before they begin to open their eyes. Pretty hard looking lot they are. Do you recognize any of their faces?"

He lit another match as he spoke, and held it to one countenance after another until Lawrence had a chance to inspect all three.

"Can't say that I do. They are of a class with which I have had but little dealing, and a limited acquaintance. I can guess the meaning of the attack better than who made it."

"Reckon the meaning is that they are of the hard-up stripe, and they thought they saw a chance to make a stake. A prosperous-looking young stranger is exactly the kind of game such coyotes would be apt to follow in the hope of seeing a show to jump him from behind. And this was certainly an elegant spot for their little stock operation. If you have seen enough of the environs perhaps it would be well for us to turn our steps toward the area of denser population. They will be coming around shortly, and I don't suppose that you want to finish them outright. They got as good as they intend-

ed, and it might be as well to let it go at that."

"But, if I have a fancy to finish them up?" queried the young man, in a tone that might be either one of jest or earnest.

"Slay them, then, by all means; but you must excuse me from taking a hand in. I never killed a man in cold blood, whatever other sins I may have to answer for; and I don't care to begin now."

"Are you sure of that?" was the somewhat enigmatical response.

Then in a changed voice, he added:

"Yes, let us get away from here, by all means. These fellows may have more backing than you suppose, and though their teeth are pretty well drawn for the present I have no desire to be on the carpet when they come to their senses. But, my way did not lead in the direction you indicate; and I do not think I will allow a little encounter like this to change my plans. Thanking you again for your interference, which was more than I deserved, I wish you a very good-evening."

"Just as you want it, sport. I don't wish to wring myself in on a party of one who says the game is full. I only thought that as you were a stranger in the town I would give you a hint that this was not the best direction in the world for a lonely promenade. It may prove interesting; but I wouldn't give a cent for the profit in it. If you turn up missing shall I look for your corpse in the morning?"

"As you choose about that, though I believe I can guarantee that I will not be again caught napping—not this night, at least. And though I have no fears for my personal safety I might say that I would be pleased enough to have your company on the visit I intended to make were I not pretty sure that you would be inclined to laugh at the folly which prompts me to it."

"There is where you are out, ever so far. I generally calculate that I know how to run my own affairs better than any one else could do it for me; and I am willing to give every one else the blessed privilege of thinking the same thing about what concerns them until I have proved differently—to my own satisfaction, at least. For a guess I should say that you didn't come to Oro for fun, and that you were going to visit Ramah, to find out what the deuce you did come for. How is that for a bit of speculation?"

"Correct as though I had told you myself. I have heard of the witch; and though I believe some of the things that have been told me about her, I do not at all believe in her supernatural power. When she tells the truth it is because she knows what she is speaking of. Perhaps she will tell me the truth. At all events, I want to see if I can find out whether she knows anything about a matter or two in which I have a certain interest. If she does not, there will be no harm done."

Lorrimer spoke more frankly than he had yet done, and the Gent from Jaybird was inclined to believe that he was on the bed-rock of truth in what he said.

"My dear sir, you could not have got nearer to the platform I always stand on. I don't know whether you will believe me or not, but I had serious thoughts of calling on Madame Ramah, myself. She might make a suggestion in an affair in which I am interested, though, for the present, all at sea. It is a little early to call on the sorceress, since she has a notion for holding her seances as near to midnight as is possible; but perhaps she may be in a mood to talk, anyhow. What do you say to our going there together?"

"Of course I will take your word for it, though, otherwise, I might have supposed that it was purely interest for my safety which led you on such a wild goose expedition. Done, sir! We will visit the madame. I am perfectly willing that you should hear all she may have to say to me; and it was not from any desire for secrecy that I was seeking her dwelling alone. As a stranger to the town there seemed nothing else for me to do."

"If you are sure that I will not be in the way I will accept the invitation as frankly as it seems to be given," replied Mr. Jackson; "and as we have been making pretty good time since we left the toughs we have not much further to go. Yonder seems to be the spot; and there is a light in the window, so that the lady is probably awake, and waiting for visitors."

While they had been talking they had also been walking, and that at a pretty brisk gait, so that the scene of the late affray had been left quite a distance behind. As he spoke, Jackson halted, and pointed at a cabin not more than fifty yards away, from the window of which gleamed the light of which he spoke.

"So, that is the place!" exclaimed Lorrimer. "All right! We will proceed to explore. If she is equal to her reputation, and is willing to talk, we will be a great deal wiser when we come out."

CHAPTER VI.

A STRANGE PICTURE ON THE WALL.

THOUGH the cabin was small, it looked like a stout, comfortable affair. As the two had to

pass right by the window at which the lamp was burning, they had a chance to glance inside.

The room which they saw appeared to be empty, not only of occupants of the human race, but also of furniture. It hardly seemed worth while to waste time visiting a prophetess who could afford no better headquarters—though, for that matter, one who would stop in Oro City, when there were other larger and richer towns suffering from a want of a seeress, could hardly belong to the upper circle of the witch's cabal.

Something like this Lorrimer said, with a laugh.

As, Mr. Jackson had naturally a somewhat solemn way about him, it was hard to tell whether he was in jest or earnest when he answered:

"Don't be too sure of that. There is a tremendous uncertainty and a great deal of inconsistency about this sort of person. The biggest hoodoo I ever saw lived in a camp where there wasn't a game of cards played from one week's end to another, and the only seventh son of a seventh son I ever had the luck to meet was just on the verge of starvation, in spite of the fact that he could read the stars like a book. But the frauds flourish in high places, and I have known one who couldn't make even a respectable guess at what the weather was going to be for the next twenty-four hours, when he saw the sun set cloudy, who actually had to turn the people away from his door, they came so thick to have their fortunes told."

"Then you think that we may meet with—"

Lawrence hesitated, but the sport filled in the hiatus.

"A surprise? Yes. Ramah is a woman of mystery; of that there cannot be a doubt. There have been strange reports afloat in regard to her; and though I have heard the story as told by each of half a dozen visitors, who all vowed that she knew all they had ever done, and told them more than they ever would do, the strangest thing about it was that no two of them agreed about the woman herself—and one of them went so far as to vow that she was a man. How is that?"

"Humph! That is news. I have heard but one account of her. Had you spoken of this sooner I might have asked you a few questions; but now it is too late. If her eyes are as keen as we suspect, she has already seen us; and it would not do for us to linger. We will see for ourselves, and then know all about it."

"Perhaps," answered the Gent from Jaybird, rather dubiously, and the two stepped on the porch.

They had been conversing in a low tone, but still it was no surprise to them to learn that their coming had been noted. Just as Lorrimer raised his hand to knock, the door in front of him flew open, and they heard a voice from the darkness beyond:

"Enter, Lawrence Lorrimer, since it was you who led the way in the start. Your friend, if he is your friend, can await your coming outside, and have his audience in turn. If that does not suit him, let him go away, and return some other evening. One at a time! One at a time! In something your errands lie together, but the same answers will not do for both."

The voice did not seem to be that of a woman, and the darkness in front of him, and the far-away sound of the voice, conveyed to the young man the idea of distance. Here was his first surprise, for it had not seemed at all strange that he should be called by his name. That could have been learned from the hotel register; and in a town like Oro a seeress would be apt to keep herself posted as to the new arrivals, in addition to knowing all about the old residents.

But he had seen the outside of the cabin, and taken what he believed to be a pretty good measure of the interior; and here, on the very threshold, he felt that in some way his senses had been, or were being, duped. He hesitated to advance, and turned toward his companion with what would have seemed an inquiring look could it have been seen.

"Oh, go ahead, pard!" laughed the sport. "If there must be turns in this thing it is but fair that you should the first, for it is true enough that you led the way. I will light a cigar, and take a turn along the trail. I don't think I will have to cool my heels for long. No doubt the agony will soon be over. And it may be a satisfaction to know that I will be within eyesight distance of the establishment. Ramah's reputation for honest dealing is as firmly established as for truth and veracity, but you will have a double cinch on a square deal if there is a gent and his revolvers in waiting. Go ahead, and learn what the stars show—and if it is not a long life and a handsome wife, it will be gold by the cubic ton. A young man of your appearance ought to command one fortune or the other, if not both."

There was no more hesitation. The young man turned toward the door.

"As my friend grants me the right of precedence I am ready to enter if you will tell me just how to do so, but it is dark as Erebus in there, and from an outside view of things I should say it would not take long for one to

run against something in his way. I don't want to bark my shins, or tear my unmentionables."

"Step slowly forward. Then the way will be made plain."

The voice appeared to be further off than before, and without hesitation Lorrimer obeyed.

Only two steps had he taken, however, when the door swung to behind him, and at the same instant the darkness changed into light, and he was the victim of another illusion, for illusion he was sure it was.

"Halt!" commanded a voice, different from the one which had first greeted him. "You are safe so long as you obey, but folly may bring its own punishment. Look before you and note well what you see!"

Had the light faded after the first flash? or was it simply that at first the change from the thick darkness had made the brightness more vivid? It seemed to Lorrimer that he stood in a dimly lighted corridor of almost measureless length. The walls were of stone, and the ceiling was arched, while at regular intervals there hung a lamp which shed a feeble light on the stone floor directly beneath, but which left the rest of the broad flagging, for yards and yards on either side, almost invisible. Perhaps it was a skillfully managed picture, but the effect was none the less real.

While he looked he could see a person emerge from the darkness at the further end of the visible part of the corridor. At first, so far away was the figure that Lorrimer could only guess that it belonged to a human being.

Then, he could make out that it was a woman, who carried a lantern in her hand, and came on with a slow, graceful, gliding motion, everything about her growing more and more distinct, until at last her features were plainly to be seen.

In spite of himself an ejaculation of surprise fell from the lips of the young man.

At the sound, low though it was, the woman halted, and raising her lantern until it was just above the line of her forehead, peered along the line of the vaulted passage, until her eyes appeared to fall upon the man who stood at the other end.

The sight was reassuring. Still in silence, but with a look of confidence on her beautiful face, the woman moved forward once more; and now her steps were more rapid, and the smile on her face was one of delight.

How long the young woman was in making her way along the passage, Lorrimer could not then have told. It seemed as though he stood there in silence after that one exclamation, for at least ten minutes, watching the approaching figure; and that there was quite a distance still between them, when the girl-woman halted, and turning up her face toward his, as though she could see him, and had recognized him, too, spoke, in low, thrilling tones:

"Lawrence Lorrimer, do you recognize me?"

"Are you Ilma Merton, or her ghost?" was the answer, gasped out in a whisper so low that it was hard to believe it could reach the ears which were still at some distance.

"No ghost, I assure you, but real flesh and blood, even though there is, for the present, a barrier between us which neither can pass. I cannot stay long with you now; therefore the sooner you ask the questions to which you would have an answer the surer the chance that I will have time to reply to them.

The girl spoke lightly, and as though she was amused at the agitation displayed by the other; yet—was this a young girl? and did the words really proceed from the lips at which he was gazing so intently? For reasons of his own he was inclined to doubt, though it was hardly possible there was any illusion about that part of the scene. If there was, when could he again trust the evidence of his own senses?

"Sorry to have to doubt your word, but it seems as though there must be some mistake. I will own that I was thrown off my guard at your first appearance, but I know, almost beyond a doubt, that you are not Miss Merton. I can understand, now, that this is a part of the witchcraft I had been told to expect, and I confess it is beyond anything I could have anticipated. Not a soul in this place should have known that I was either relative or friend of Ilma, and I confess that nothing else could have made me so ready to believe in the truth of what I may hear. If you, whoever you may be, know this much of my affairs it looks as though you ought to know a great deal more. No need to ask after Ilma, herself. You would hardly make an answer that would give the lie to the statement that you have just made. As the next best thing, I would ask you, how is her father?"

"Dead, years ago, as you very well know," was the answer, given as sorrowfully as though this was in truth the daughter herself. "Dead—murdered, when on the eve of the success he had been so long praying for. Why harrow up my feelings by the question?"

"Ah, dead, is he? Now, tell me, by whose hands did he die? That will be the last test I will propose. Answer truly, and I will believe whatever else you may choose to tell me."

"Cruel, to torture me by attempting to re-

open the old wound. And yet I have promised to answer, and I will to the best of my ability. I am not sure who did the deed, but from what I have learned, it was his wicked friend, his treacherous companion. What his name was I cannot say for sure, but I think he was known in those days as Cool Charlie. Remember the name; and if you ever hear more elsewhere about him, pray let me know. I am more interested in this matter than you."

Again Lawrence Lorrimer seemed to be staggered, though at exactly what portion of the statement he did not show.

"Cool Charlie?" he repeated, in a questioning sort of way. "I doubt if I have ever heard the name before—which is strange if the man was once a pard of Ilma Merton's father. Over what was the quarrel? or for what purpose was the deed done?"

"There was no quarrel; it was a cold-blooded murder, done for the sake of the mine in which that desperado was entitled to no share. I can give you no further particulars. If you would learn them you must find them out for yourself."

"But the mine! Perhaps you could tell me more of that. What was it, and where was it? I do not disguise the fact that it was to consult you on this very subject I called. Tell me the truth and your present reward will be as great as you could ask for, and if anything comes of it, some time in the near future your purse will be again heavily weighted with gold."

"And you still doubt that I am the real Ilma Merton? Ah, so much the worse for you. Madame Ramah will answer your questions with more fullness than I, though perhaps with not quite so much truth. I know nothing about the mine save that it was called the Alcazor. Good by, now! The madame is at hand, and I must go. When we meet again I may be free to explain how it is or was that I met you. For the present, good-night!"

With a graceful bow the girl turned, and began to retrace her steps down the long corridor.

"One moment, wait!" exclaimed Lorrimer; but the girl did not turn her head, or show in the least that she heard him. And as she went sweeping back the path by which she had come, every light along the long, vaulted passage was extinguished, and once more Lorrimer was alone in the darkness, wondering what more wonderful thing could come next.

CHAPTER VII.

ABEL KAIN GOES A-WOOLING.

THE nabob of Oro City was Abel Kain. As Chet Taylor had explained to young Lorrimer, he was a man who was not only rich, for a mushroom town, but he was also a bad one to buck against.

He had held his own on various occasions when compelled to fight, but that was for the most part in the earlier days of his citizenship. Of late there were but few of the inhabitants who cared to set themselves against him; and those who did, always came out second best at the time, and met with afterclaps in the near future.

He was a fine-looking man, not much over forty, who dressed well, lived well, and made money out of the different irons he had in the fire. With the fair sex he had a free and easy way, though, until lately, he had not turned his eyes in their direction to any great extent; and there were only a few who noticed that he was paying some attentions, in a furtive way, to Miss Minnie, the young lady already spoken of as waiting on the table at the Golden Goat.

As his advances were made after a careful fashion, it is possible that the outsiders who had their attention drawn to the game were posted before the lady herself suspected that she had made a ten-strike, and bowled over the richest matrimonial prize in Oro City.

There were so many other gentlemen who allowed it to be seen that they were hard hit, it was no great wonder that she did not notice the actual seriousness of the attentions bestowed on her at occasional times by Mr. Kain.

Just how the lady had come to be a denizen of Oro City was a secret which Miss Minnie had never seen fit to explain, unless the truth was known to Japhet Gigson. He had been approached in the matter, but had only vouchsafed the information that he supposed it was because she had thought it a good place to locate, and the Golden Goat as much like a home as she would be able to find.

As far as was known, she had no relations or friends in the town; and she did not have the appearance of one who had always lived in the station in which she now found herself, though she took to it and its duties readily enough. All that was known was that she had made her appearance with the coming of the stage, some months previous to the opening date of this story, had boarded for a week at the Golden Goat, and then accepted a position as a waiter, and general utility personage.

Not a word could be said against her conduct since she had been there, and public opinion pronounced her every inch a lady. She was not too proud to speak to the average miner, and yet she

was so dignified that on the least approach to familiarity she crushed it out on the instant.

Of course she was handsome. Tall, and gracefully proportioned, she looked around her with an air of consciousness which might have perhaps seemed somewhat at variance with the blooming freshness of her face had her observers been critical. She escaped that, perhaps, by a happy medium in dress. Whether on duty, or taking a stroll for rest and recreation, she was always so becomingly clad, in such a simple way, that she left only the impression of correctness.

As a general thing these strolls were taken alone; but occasionally she was joined for a short distance by one of the young men whose acquaintance she had made after a quasi fashion at the table. Somehow, she was always able to part with them before long without offending their dignity, or making them regret their temerity. Once she had gone to a masked ball at the Casino, under the protecting care of Japhet, himself; and had danced several times, as though she enjoyed the exercise, but was not so completely fascinated that she would be apt to be a regular visitant at the soirees which were given at that popular resort.

The affair in which Sweet William and the Gent from Jaybird figured was actually a shock to the people who were best acquainted with Miss Minnie, since they had not thought anyone would dare to offer her an insult; and in case such a thing had to happen, it was a reproach to the town that it had to be taken up by a comparative stranger.

There was something to be said for Sweet William, to be sure. When sober he was considered rather an amiable tough, but this evening he happened to be drunk, or he never would have insisted on the young lady accompanying him to the Casino when once she had stated positively that she did not intend to go.

Sweet William was insisting with language which was beginning to verge on the profane when Mr. Jackson came with a rush, gave a word of warning, and then hit out.

That was the whole story, as far as it had gone. It is true that Abel Kain was in the distance, but he arrived too late to offer the assistance which he would no doubt have given if the Gent from Jaybird had not forestalled him.

About the time that Lawrence Lorrimer was setting out for his trip around town, Miss Minnie stepped out from the rear entrance to the Goat. She seemed to have no particular object in view, for she looked carelessly around her, and then strolled leisurely down the street, not so very far in the rear of the young man that she could not observe his motions, though it was only casually that she paid any attention to them.

She was so deeply engaged with her own thoughts that she scarcely glanced up as some one stepped to her side. She simply moved a little to the right to allow him to pass on.

"Are your wits wool-gathering, Miss Minnie? You seem to have an awful time puzzling your brain over something. I have been walking behind you for the last fifty yards, and in that time you never paid the least attention to the outside world. Is there anything on your mind? Perhaps I could help you guess the riddle, if there is one that is giving you trouble just now."

The lady recognized the voice of Abel Kain, and turned her gaze on his countenance, while she listened to his address. When he was through she answered somewhat wearily:

"I was not thinking of anything in particular; save that I was tired and lonesome. To get away from the feeling I came out on the street, but it seems to be more oppressive than ever."

"I have felt that way myself, and can sympathize with you; yet, perhaps, I am not altogether sincere in saying that, since you may have yourself to blame more than you think. The best of us are tired at times, but Miss Minnie is a young lady who never need want for company. Oro is perfectly willing to do her all the homage that her soul could crave, if she would only allow it."

"And be more lonesome than ever. Have you never read of the man of the crowd, who was never more of a hermit than when he was in the densest throng?"

"Oh, yes; but that was different. Come, now, Miss Minnie, you confess that you are lonesome at times. Let me be your physician. I am somewhat older than you, perhaps, but not old enough to be your father, or to be beyond the reach of a desire for companionship myself. Oro will tell you that I am a safe man to tie to, and I can assure you that I respect you as though you were my own sister. What is to prevent us from forming an alliance, offensive and defensive? I think it would not be hard to induce Gigson to lighten your duties somewhat; and there is plenty of time when you are not needed at the hotel that you might spend to better advantage than moping within doors."

"Please, don't, Mr. Kain! There is a recognized fitness in things, which we cannot get over. I am Miss Minnie, the young lady who waits on the table at the Golden Goat. You are Mr. Kain, with an interest in half a dozen mines, all of them more than paying, and with

other possessions which look almost boundless in a town like this. It would not do. The world does not believe in platonic; and—well, you can see for yourself how circumspectly I have to walk. Because I visited the Casino with Gigson, and tried to forget myself for a few moments, that brute of a Sweet William thought he had the right to force his attentions on me. Of course I had no personal fear; but how easily it might have led to bloodshed. If he had had another man to deal with—and I suppose that there were a dozen more in Oro who would have come to my aid had they been in sight—the affair would not have terminated this side of killing."

"And served the brute right—you made no mistake in the term. I was only a trifle late, but when I got on the ground it was beyond my hands. Otherwise we might have given him a necktie party, and a serious reminder that if his ugly face was seen in Oro again it would be at his peril. Such fellows deserve a lesson, and it is in the interest of all womanhood that they receive it."

"Perhaps; but in this country lessons are serious things; and it would be a terrible shock to me to know that what some might call an indiscretion on my part had been the cause of one being given. No, Mr. Kain. I have tried to be affable with all without being a friend to any, since I came to Oro. I respect you and your position very much, but we cannot be more than the speaking acquaintances we have been since we first accidentally met. It is not likely that I will remain long in Oro, and until I go, when we meet we must continue to nod and then pass on. I cannot be your friend."

"Then let me be more than your friend. As your lover you would find me always at your feet; and as your husband we two would be equal to the best of them here, or wherever we might go. In any event it will be but a short time until I leave Oro; and when my affairs here were wound up you would have the world before you from which to choose a location."

While the direction in which the conversation was drifting had not remained entirely unseen, the sudden and decided avowal was a genuine surprise to Miss Minnie, who started back and raised her hand as if it was a blow rather than a compliment which had been given her.

"Wait! Stop! Your sympathy has made you wild. Such a thing should not be thought of. I do not doubt that you are sincere, and only wish that I had given no opportunity for such a declaration. I appreciate the honor; but in no way are we suited to each other, and the least I can say in justice to you is that it would be best that we never speak again, unless in the presence of the world, where all that is said can be heard by it as well. What madness prompts you to seek to link so bright a destiny as yours with that of a nameless waif like me?"

"It is neither madness nor folly," retorted Kain, who, now that the words were said, was the cooler of the two.

"Whatever is my destiny shall be yours, and I make no question that it will be a happy one. You do yourself injustice. I suspect that you are not so much of a waif, nor so nameless as you would have me believe."

"How! What do you mean by that?"

"I have reason to believe that your inquiries, few as they have been, were not without an object; and that you came to Oro with a mission—which may yet have a happy ending. Confess the truth to me; and see if I cannot give you reasons for the belief that I have named."

"You are intrusive, sir," answered Miss Minnie, drawing herself up with an angry sparkle in her eyes. "I have no confidences to give to any man; and he who seeks to obtain them does so at his peril."

CHAPTER VIII.

A WONDERFUL RESURRECTION.

ABEL KAIN was wise enough to see that he had made a mistake, and yet was not cool enough, or cunning enough to rectify it. He was too sure that he had detected more than indifference in those tones, to drop the matter until a more propitious season.

"So that your peril be mine, I ask no more. And I am a man who has never yet failed in anything on which I have set my heart. I have set my heart on you. And, peril or no peril, while both of us are alive, I do not give up the game until the stakes are won. If to have such an admirer angers you, be angry—for the present. In the not very distant future I think I can promise a different and a more friendly feeling."

"Never! Let this be settled between us, once and for all time. There can be nothing but friendship between us, and not much of that. I can speak more frankly with you, perhaps, because I think that for your own sake, if not for mine, it will go no further. I have no time or heart for love-making or its counterfeit; and I doubt if there is not the same thing to be said of you. You must have some ulterior ends of which I know nothing; for my poor, troubled face could never have drawn a man of your

stamp into such folly. Forget what you have said, and say farewell, while I can still respect you. More persistence would only lead to hate; and when I hate once, it is for all time, and to the bitter end."

And very handsome did she seem as she towered over him, with one hand upraised, and her whole frame quivering with emotion. But Mr. Kain would have sooner had the display made somewhere else than in the public street of Oro City, even though, by good chance, there were no spectators present to enjoy his rebuff.

"That is your last word, Miss Minnie? I begin to think that I have mistaken my course, though it is not too late to try another. It may be that I will never give you up—and yet will be just such a foe as you threatened that you could become. There is no half-way work with Abel Kain. When he puts his hand to the plow he never turns back till the end of the furrow."

"I verily believe that you have condescended to threaten. So much the better. You are unmasked, and I am on my guard. It is but a poor stake for which you gamble, but there is a consolation in knowing that you can never win. I wish you a very good-evening."

"One moment more."

At the boundless sarcasm which the lady put into her tones he had recovered his self-control.

"Why this sudden fury I know not, though I might be able to give a guess. Let that pass. You have scarcely given me the time to make an honest avowal of the feeling which it never angers any true woman to know that she has inspired. Good, again. I know better now how you are to be won. When I speak again you will at least listen—and I think that your answer will not again be no."

Without waiting for a reply he turned and strode hastily away, out of the veriest chance his steps turning toward the Ready John Saloon, where he halted, and listened, since from within arose a peculiar sound, which appeared to be caused by the whacking together of two sticks. While he listened he heard the voice of the proprietor, shouting after his most wicked style:

"Hold hard, thar! Some ov you men put that fool whar his head will have a chance ter soak long enuf ter git cool. I don't want ter slay him, but ef he can't be kept frum chippin' inter this game any other way I'll have ter do it."

Ready John was a rough of the first water in many respects, but he enjoyed a good fight. Dennis was doing his best to make things interesting for him, and for that reason he felt called upon to look after his safety a little, when he saw the fellow whose wrist the Irishman had so nearly broken come staggering forward, holding his revolver in his other hand.

Several friends had been trying to induce Sweet William to keep out of the ring, but he had made his escape from them, and was bent on having revenge for the several worstings he had received.

Again his friends came to the front, and managed to drag him away before he had the opportunity to do any damage. As he went he was vowing vengeance alike on the Irishman and the Gent from Jaybird.

Abel Kain was in a position to hear what he said, and seemed to enjoy it. His curiosity was excited, and he did what he had seldom done since the first days of his sojourn in Oro—he went into the saloon. The racket was growing louder, and he began to think that Mr. Jackson must be there also, and taking a hand. If not, he had not been about, and it was worth while finding out what had been going on. It might furnish a hint as to the cause of the decided aversion Miss Minnie had just shown.

Mr. Jackson, however, had left the house a few minutes previously; and Dennis, left to look after his own interests, was holding an end up for himself, and another for his pard.

With an easy grace Kain edged his way through the crowd until he obtained a footing near to the spot where the battle with single-sticks was going on.

Ready John was a singular sort of a fellow in more ways than one. To strangers against whom he had no immediate designs he was inclined to be surly; and yet he occasionally took sudden fancies, made friends of the most unlikely sort of people; and stuck to them through thick and thin until the edge wore off, or until there was some new game started which was more interesting. And there was no man who could draw him closer than one who could get the better of him in most any diversion without saying anything that would render it necessary to follow the matter up to a bitter ending. More than once he explained that these were the kind of men it paved to know.

Kain was thinking of all this, and not without some outward tokens of an inward disturbance he felt, when his eyes fell upon the figure of a man stretched out at full length upon a bench at one corner of the room. It was only a chance that the crowd parted so that he caught the glimpse, and almost instantly there were a dozen men standing in the line from him to Saintly Sam; but he then understood that murder had been done there, or that a murdered man had come thither to die.

"What's that over there?" he asked of a fellow

who stood at his elbow, at the same time giving a toss of his head in the direction of the body.

"Saintly Sam, and dead as a mackerel. He has a bullet through his head, and some of the boys seemed to think he might have a dose of poison under his ribs, besides. That was what started this racket."

"The dence you say! Everybody seems to be taking it pretty cool. How did it happen? Was it that friend of John's who is trying to knock his head off, who did the trick?"

"Reckon not. When the boss got up an excitement the fellow left, and the man from Jaybird went along with him. You see, the hanging match can keep, but this isn't to be got up every hour in the day, and the boys want to enjoy it while they have the chance. They are down on the party, solid, and I reckon they will hunt him up after while. I guess the whole thing was a mistake, but that don't make much difference, you know, as long as they can make it hot for somebody, and give Sam a good send-off."

The information, such as it was, came in detached sentences, between the strokes of the sticks, and if it had been almost any one else but Abel Kain who was asking questions, it is doubtful if there would have been any answers at all. The corpse of Saintly Sam could be looked at by and by, and at their leisure; but this match with the sticks would soon be over, and that would be the end of it. That was the way this man felt; and everybody else in the room appeared to share his sentiments, since the body had been lying there unnoticed and forgotten from the moment that Sweet William went down before the heavy hand of Mr. Jackson.

But, Kain was different from the rest, and having had this brief explanation he pushed his way over toward the body. He never thought of questioning the information since it agreed so well with his own observations and surmises. When he had almost reached the bench on which the body was lying he halted, and took a careful survey, first of the body, and then of the room.

Not a soul was looking in that direction, so far as he could see. All heads appeared to be turned toward a common center, and he could hear the clatter of the cudgels, the genial voice of the little Irishman, and the lower tones of the spectators. The battle was scientifically waged, and the connoisseurs who were noting ever turn to the conflict had no thought of anything else. If Kain had hesitated at first he hesitated no longer, but, stepping swiftly forward came to the side of the corpse, and bending down, attempted to thrust his right hand into the bosom of Sam's shirt.

And then a very singular, and a very alarming thing took place.

The action galvanized the corpse into life! From between the lips of the parted jaws there issued a wild yell, which pierced to every corner of the building, and, with a convulsive bound, the dead man reached his feet, at the same time swinging his ponderous right fist straight between the eyes of inquisitive Abel Kain.

The yell compelled attention. The men who had been all eyes for what had been going on in the center of the room, felt their ears irresistibly drawn toward the corner; and the fall of Kain, which followed the stroke, unveiled a sight which was startling on account of its unexpectedness, and dreadful because of its impossibility.

Saintly Sam was on his feet, glaring around like a madman, and yet, to nearly every observer, seemed to be as dead as ever. When he bounded toward the crowd, the crowd was ready to bound the other way. There was a panic and a rout. Men went this way and that, and in an instant there was no thought of anything but flight. So unreasoning a stampede had never taken place since the first pick was struck on the site of Oro City.

Even Ready John was for the moment thoroughly disorganized, without fairly knowing the reason why. The yell had startled him just a little, throwing him off his guard, and Dennis had taken the opportunity to throw in a blow that would have stunned an ordinary man altogether. It knocked him backward, made him dizzy, and would have left him an easy victim for the Irishman, if the latter had chosen to press his advantage.

But when the crowd left, Dennis went with it. Only, he did not stop with the rest. He had no call to linger at the door. He vanished. When the proprietor of the saloon had fairly recovered his senses, he was in the middle of the floor, without a soul in sight. When he turned, at the sound behind him, he saw only Abel Kain, who was blindly staggering to his feet.

Saintly Sam had gone with the rest!

CHAPTER IX.

THE REVELATIONS OF RAMAH.

LAWRENCE LORRIMER, waiting in the darkness, felt no fear of what was to come; but after the genuine surprise he had already experienced, was ready for almost any strange spectacle when once more the place was lighted. The result was that he was actually disappointed at what he really saw. After a few moments of silence and darkness the space in front of him was again illuminated, but instead of the in-

terminable length which had stretched out in front he found himself in a small room, in perfect keeping with the outside of the cabin. Its furniture, to be sure, was of a better class than he would have looked for if he had not already seen the possibilities of the place; and it seemed somewhat strange that it could have all been arranged so quickly and so silently, during the short season he had been in the darkness. But this time there was no mistake about the reality of his surroundings, and as he was beginning to be tired with standing in one position he advanced without hesitation and threw himself into the nearest chair.

He found the piece of furniture just what it had seemed, and judged that the rest of it was no more of a sham. As he dropped into the seat he thought to himself, "I wonder how long I am to wait here for the sorceress, or whether she expects to make herself visible at all?"

This was what he thought, but no sound left his lips, so that it was quite unexpected to hear a voice almost at his shoulder answer his unspoken question.

"Ramah is with you now; if you choose to turn your head you will see."

Of course he chose to turn. More than that, he had hardly caught a glimpse of the seeress when he was on his feet. Although the face that was turned toward him was in the shadow he could see the figure quite well and it belonged to a young woman, and perhaps a handsome one, unless he was very greatly mistaken. As he stood there bowing, somewhat deferentially, he was greeted with a laugh that was full of mockery.

"Ha, ha!" said the same silvery voice. "You are nothing if not gallant—when the occasion seems to call for it. If I was a score of years older, and a few hundred times uglier, there would be none of that bowing and scraping. Really, Lawrence Lorrimer, I did not give you credit with being so prudent when you came to face the ghosts."

"I am not one who is to be frightened by hobgoblins, nor yet made to forget my duty to the fair sex. I came to consult the seeress, to be sure, but if I find her a handsome young lady I will be apt to treat her as such. Why should you laugh?"

"For reasons that are best known to myself. Enough that I will laugh no more until this interview is ended. Speak, and at once. What is it you desire to consult me concerning?"

"If you cannot guess you would be but a poor prophetess. Indeed, you have always shown that you were well posted in regard to the object I had in view; and perhaps you have little more that you would be willing to say. Of course, I understand that it was you with whom I had the interview a few moments ago, and that you assumed the guise you did in order to convince me more fully of your power. If I could induce you to admit this I would feel more hopeful of gaining information which would really prove satisfactory. I would first learn where Ilma Merton really is. After that, a fuller explanation of the matters in regard to the Alcazor mine, so lately spoken of, would be in order. Tell me the whole truth in regard to these points, and you can name your own price for the interview. I think I will be able to pay anything in reason."

"When a man ceases to believe the evidence of his eyes, what hope is there of convincing him of the truth through his ears? Ilma Merton was here but a moment ago. More than that I care not to tell, nor does she wish it."

"Sorry am I to differ with a lady, but you can not expect me to believe against my own judgment, which is better than all the five senses combined."

"And why does your judgment tell you that the lady you saw was not the fair Ilma?"

"Because you would not dare to have me believe, whatever you may say. If I had not understood the illusion at the very outset, I would have had the house down about your ears long ago, or I would have had her hand in mine, and heard from her lips what she was doing here. I have sworn to find her, and I have never yet failed to keep an oath."

"Perhaps, perhaps, my friend. And yet, should you dare attempt to harm Ramah or her possessions, you might find that you were not fighting her alone. If you believe not, the loss be yours. I can tell you nothing more of the young lady, nor of the matters of which you spoke with her. On any other subject I am at liberty to speak, but after what she said my lips must remain closed. Thus it is now. Perhaps, if you come again the spirits may not be so uncommunicative in regard to the things of which you and she spoke. If they are, there will be nothing lost but a little time, and that is something of which Lawrence Lorrimer has plenty for his own use, and more to throw away."

"Do I understand that the interview is at an end?"

"If you have nothing to ask in regard to other things, yes; all but the handing over of a certain uncertain amount, without which the spiritual demonstrations to be met with in the cabin of Ramah would of necessity come to a

quick close. Even a prophetess must live, and with all my miracles I have never found but one way to keep a flour barrel full for any great length of time after one's credit is exhausted. After you have decided how far your generosity and your sense of justice will carry you, your room will be better than your presence. You must remember that there is another gentleman to follow after you, and it is time that he was being admitted."

From his breast pocket Lorrimer drew a wallet, and with scarcely a glance slipped out a bill which he tendered to the seeress.

"If you had been convinced of the reality of all things, I suppose you would have not been a whit more liberal," she laughed as she gave a careless glance at the figure in the corner.

"Twenty dollars for hearing and seeing things which you did not believe in is pretty fair payment. The unexpended balance will be placed to your credit, to be drawn on at some future occasion. Your friend grows impatient now, and is debating whether it would not be best to leave you to my tender mercies while he goes back to look after his other friend, whom he left in a position which, to most men, would be one of danger to the death. Should he do so it would be the worse for you. So the stars tell me. Overtake him and tell him that Ramah waits."

The latter words sounded more like the caution of a friend than the dismissal of a fortune-teller, and for once it suited Lorrimer to heed advice. He bowed gracefully, and turned to go. The door opened in front of him, apparently of its own accord, and stepping out upon the porch he heard the snap of a spring behind him. The consultation was over, leaving a doubt whether he had learned little or much.

The warning was not altogether thrown away. He immediately looked keenly around for the Gent from Jaybird.

Mr. Jackson was standing some little distance from the house, his face turned in the direction of the town, and it was not hard to think that he was contemplating a move in that direction. He cast a backward glance, however, before starting, and then wheeled abruptly, and strode toward the cabin.

"I'll swear that I am not given to going back on a man I have called my pard, but I had begun to think I would have time to take a little run toward town, and be back again before the interview was over. It is to be hoped that you got the worth of your money and the right change back. Either I was more impatient than usual, or it took a mighty long time to summon all her spirits from the vasty deep. My affairs had better wait for a more convenient season, I suspect. She must have pretty well exhausted her powers worrying through with yours. How was it? Up to the standard?"

"In some respects beyond the standard. She showed me something I had not dreamed of seeing. If I could find her in the mood to tell all that she knows I imagine I would learn enough to make my hair curl, at the very least. In the few moments—"

"Few moments! Hold on! Stick a pin there. It was a good hour by the watch. I timed you, because I had heard something of the kind before and I wanted to make a sure thing of it."

Mr. Jackson made his statement after the manner of a man who intends to be believed; and surprising as it was Lorrimer did not doubt. He uttered an exclamation of disgust.

"An hour! Then the prophetess understands the trick of moving her machinery better than I thought. The long and short of it is, I must have been drugged."

"Like as not. Are you sure your pocketbook is all right?"

"Perfectly. I examined that before I left. It may be that she took a look at it, and did not find it sufficiently well filled to tempt her from the path of honesty. But I will be digesting the matter while I am lingering around on the outside, waiting for you. She is ready; and sent word that if you failed to meet her at once it would be at your peril. I was not afraid to beard the lioness in her den, and it will never do for you to turn back. Keep your wits about you, and I wouldn't wonder if you got as much satisfaction out of the call as you could hope for or expect."

"Strikes me there is something of a dare in that, and put in that way I can't hold back. Wait for me here, and we will hold to the bargain, and compare notes when I get back."

Lorrimer had no chance to answer, since before Mr. Jackson was done speaking he was gone.

"And a foolish affair it is," thought the Gent from Jaybird, with a shrug of the shoulders, as he passed through the opened door. "Of course I don't believe in any such nonsense, but perhaps there will be some satisfaction trying the only remaining plan after all the rest have failed."

So he mused, but was quite astounded to hear clearly spoken, as if the very air heard his thoughts:

"Yet if found, Ilma Merton would like nothing better than to drive a knife to your heart—"

in the same way you drove one not so many years ago that the world has grown a great deal older. If you do not believe my words ask her and be convinced."

And then, in the darkness, the same scene as that so lately looked upon by Lorrimer began to shape itself.

He gazed down a corridor, just as Lorrimer had done, and saw a female figure advancing, though he did not at once recognize it. It was hooded and cloaked, and yet there was a faintly suggestive air of something familiar about it.

Mr. Jackson was every whit as cool as Lorrimer had been, and he knew, of course, that there was no such passage as this in the cabin of Ramah. Perhaps if he had never heard anything in regard to the wonders to be seen there, he might have been more astounded, but though this was different from anything he had heretofore heard of, it was only a development of the original methods with which Ramah had begun her career in Oro City.

At the seeming distance of a score of yards the figure halted, raised the downcast head, threw back the hood which had enveloped her features and stared straight forward, though without appearing to perceive the spectator who stood in the shadows.

"Great heavens!" exclaimed Mr. Jackson, astonished out of his coolness. "It is Ilma Merton, herself!"

CHAPTER X.

A CONFIDENCE IS INTERRUPTED.

THE words of the Gent from Jaybird were spoken in a suppressed tone, though they were rife with excitement. They might or they might not have reached the ears for which they were hardly intended. At any rate, there was nothing to indicate that they had done so. The figure still remained in the same expectant attitude.

Then he heard again the voice which had so mysteriously addressed him on his entrance. The tones were not the same which Lorrimer had heard when conversing with the sorceress, and yet they belonged to the same person. If the Gent from Jaybird had any idea of the looks of the speaker, he had in his mind's eye a bent, wrinkled, ancient old beldame, who muttered from between toothless gums.

And this is what he heard:

"Ha, ha! And so Ilma Merton comes to consult with Ramah, the seeress? Well, well! Who would have thought to see the long missing turn up at last? And what is it that I can tell the handsome young lady? Cross her hand with gold, and ask what you will. To-night, and now, I can tell all that has ever happened, and much of what will be. Look me in the eyes, and ask what you would most know. The answer will be quick and true."

"Have done with this jugglery and nonsense!" retorted the girl, though she turned to the side from which the voice seemed to come. "I am not here because I believe in any powers of yours to read the future, or, unaided, to describe the past, but because I have reason to know that you have learned in a secret but natural way, the inward history of many a crime. It is concerning one crime that I have come to consult you—the crime at the Alcazor. Does that tell you anything?"

"Nothing more than I knew already. You are Ilma Merton, and you seek the witch's aid to learn how your father died. Perhaps it would be better not to know all the truth. If he is dead and buried why not let him rest?"

"Why not, except that I have sworn vengeance on the man who murdered my poor father! First, to be certain that I have learned without mistake who that man was; then, to find him. For the rest, he shall die as my father died. A knife-thrust, and it will all be over."

"Perhaps, perhaps! And yet, it would be well to guard your own heart when that same thrust is being made. Sleeping or waking the man who can reach the heart of Cool Charlie must be a wonder; what chance will there be for a woman?"

"It will be no chance; it will be fate! It will be the apotheosis of revenge. You have mentioned his name! In that much you have told me that I have made no mistake so far. Now, tell me where to find him, and my labor will be soon ended."

"True, I might tell; but perhaps it would be better not. Better for you, or better for him. Why should the one or the other, or both of you, die? Search for him; and if you find him yourself, then will we know that what follows has been ordained by fate indeed."

"What is fate to you, while there is gold to be made here, and at the present time? See! Here it is. A handful. Where that came from there is more. Direct me to him. This shall be yours down, and after I have found him the rest shall be placed in your hands."

"No; for though I tell the truth as it comes to me I stop short of that which will cause bloodshed. It has been years since the man you seek has been called by the name you know. Perhaps he is dead; perhaps he is living. He may be in this very town for aught that you may know. More than that I shall not tell you now,

or until I have thought over it to make sure what is the right thing to do. Give me the gold and retire. When you come again there may be more which I can tell you."

"Take it, then, as an earnest of what can be expected if you but guide me on the search. I will ask no other questions now, though it might be worth your while to tell me where are the landmarks and the records of the Alcazor mine."

"Easier to answer that than to say where you could hope to find Cool Charlie; though, at a pinch, I might give more than a guess at either. Yet, you have friends near, who might tell you more of these things than you have dreamed of. When found, question them squarely. Then, if they refuse to answer, come to Ramah, and she may tell more. The hour is late, and there is another in waiting to whom I had pledged myself. Go in peace."

"Peace!" echoed the girl, fiercely.

"While he lives there can be no peace. It is not likely that I will come again. I have tested your powers and they are not equal to your reputation. You have but named a name which I already had at my tongue's end, and this mummery has neither terror nor charm for me. I will vanish as I came, and take up the search again and alone."

"Retire, then; and when you have found that the search is vain you may return to Ramah."

Without further leave-taking, the hood was thrown again over the head that never even bowed; the figure wheeled; and Mr. Jackson heard a slight swish, as of a descending curtain. The corridor was no longer in front of him, but instead, he was gazing at a blank wall, such as he well might believe was the further one of the cabin.

"Has Ramah done well; has she answered the questions it was in your mind to ask her? If not, there is still time to speak. Seek not to learn too much. If this was what was in your mind to know, be content and join your friend, who waits without as impatiently as you did but a short time ago."

"I reckon, madame, that there is nothing more to say. If you can't show me anything nearer to the truth than the late phantasmagoria, I may as well be moving. I have seen magic-lantern exhibitions which were worse managed; and I have heard several lies, thought to be stupendous at the time, which could not hold a candle to the explanatory remarks that accompanied this. But, as a specimen of ventriloquism, I would not ask for a more pronounced success. As such I am willing to pay for the entertainment."

"You have no questions to ask in regard to what you have just seen?"

"Not a question; but I'll give you an extra ten if you will direct me to the present domicile of the young lady who was speaking for blood and hair. Perhaps I could tell her some of the things which you left out, and make more than that out of the trade."

"So you are willing to admit that the young lady is flesh and blood, after all. If that be so, where does the magic-lantern come in at? Ah, those who pretend to doubt the power of Ramah are forced to confess at the last how they have wronged her in their sneers. I might tell it if I chose, but I leave that for you discover for yourself. Enough that I have shown the one thing in your mind you asked to see. At one sitting Ramah can do but little more. As I told Ilma Merton, I tell you: Come again if you would learn more."

"My dear madame, I assure you, I am not sneering at your powers. They are certainly wonderful. How you got your information, and how you identified me, is beyond my comprehension, and I think it might not be amiss if I made a little investigation to find out. I can imagine that you may be a dangerous woman, and that you have dangerous confederates. Who the latter are would not be as hard to find out, perhaps, as you think. I do not believe that the young lady in question can be one of them, though I know so little about her that I am scarcely prepared to say positively. It would be the joke of the season if she was. There are two horns to the dilemma, and I have not entirely decided which one I should take, for the sake of my peace of mind. When I get ready I may have something to tell you which will be more useful than entertaining."

"Beware of attempting to threaten Ramah! She may be only a woman, but she is a power. Join your friend and think over what you have heard and seen."

Mr. Jackson was willing to accept the dismissal without question. He understood that it was useless to ask further in regard to the girl both he and Lorrimer had recognized as Ilma Merton. That, as they had recognized the face and form which was either hers in fact or in picture, though which of the two they were, or how it came that Ramah was able to produce them, was a mystery beyond the reach of speculation. There was more in this than Mr. Jackson had anticipated, and yet there was far less satisfaction about what he had learned than he could have surmised. He went out very thoughtful, and no little mystified.

Lawrence Lorrimer was in waiting. He had

been more or less busy with his own thoughts, and the time had passed without much impatience on his part, though the situation was not the most pleasant that could be imagined. He seemed glad when Mr. Jackson made his appearance.

"I thought of what you had told me, and made up my mind there was no use to expect you, under an hour," was his answer to the excuses made by the gent from Jaybird.

"I found a tolerably comfortable seat out yonder on the trail, and there has not been a soul near, so far as I know. All the same, I don't think I want to visit the sorceress again very soon, unless she will receive by daylight. This midnight work is not cheerful, to say the least, and I am not sure that there is any profit to be derived from it, either. How was it? I suppose I will not seem too inquisitive if I ask. You had a little curiosity in regard to my experience, as you remember."

"I expect that the best move I could make would be to go back and strangle the old harri-dan," responded Mr. Jackson, thoughtfully. "She is capable of a great deal of truth, but she mixes it with an amount of fiction that might be dangerous if things were as she says—a statement which perhaps you can understand, though it is not the most lucid in the world. To illustrate. She gave me a name that I have not borne for years, and which I thought was forgotten forever; and in the next breath she accused me of a murder of which I knew nothing, and indeed had never heard of until she suggested it. How was that? I ought to be happy in the discovery of such power, where I had thought to find nothing but general fraud. I wonder who the woman is, anyhow? She did not allow me a sight of her precious face, but from her voice I should judge that she was about a thousand years old. But, supposing that she had seen me in those days of old, how could she guess that I would put her knowledge to the test? She could not have gotten up the exhibition to which she treated me without considerable preparation, which she could hardly have afforded to give to it if there was much chance that it would be labor thrown away."

"In part I might say the same, though in one respect I was the more favored. I saw her face, or what was supposed to be her face, and she is not old, and she is not ugly. Such things can be remedied in part by a skillful make-up, but I do not think I could be deceived very badly as to the genuineness of a feminine article which I had the chance to contemplate under a good light and at no great distance. Perhaps, if you had been favored with as good a view as I was, you might feel more charitable. A fair face will atone for a number of sins. I would advise you to look out for your heart if she ever lets the light of her countenance shine directly upon you."

Lorrimer laughed as he spoke; and yet he was evidently in earnest.

"Thanks for the friendly warning; but the time for danger of that kind has gone by. As the Cool Charlie she spoke about I was not very impressionable; and since that time I have had the one great emotion of my life. I don't think it would be possible for me to have another of the same nature."

"She called you Cool Charlie, did she?" asked Lorrimer, with strange interest in his tone, much as he tried to disguise it.

"That was the name; and I could have sworn that no one in Oro City had ever heard of it, or if any one had it was by this time forgotten, and to crown the very cap of the climax she said that the woman I love would slay me on sight should she ever meet with and recognize me as that individual. Good Lord! The sorceress said that I had slain her father. There is a game behind it all; but what does it mean? If she gave you as hard a conundrum to puzzle over I don't wonder that you did not get lonely while sitting out here in the trail, trying to solve it."

Lorrimer laughed, and by this time he was entirely himself again.

"If I could explain the whole truth you would understand that my experience was stranger still. In brief—"

"Wait a bit," interrupted the Gent from Jaybird, in an undertone. "There are spies, or something worse, on our trail, and I want to see what it means. I will be with you again, in a moment."

And he suddenly sprang away, into the convenient shadow, where he had thought he detected the lurkers.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FIRST STEP TOWARD A SOLUTION.

MR. JACKSON'S pursuit was vigorous, though brief. The figures which he thought he saw flitting near disappeared, and the moment he was sure they were out of sight he gave over his exertions, and returned to the spot where he had left Lorrimer.

To his surprise and disgust he found the young gentleman no longer there. His first thought, indeed, was, that some harm might have happened to him, even though he had heard no noise, which he most certainly would have done

had any struggle taken place. To make certain, he lighted a little waxen match and began to search the ground for traces of any affray. He had no thought of any danger to himself, nor had he any fear of the men he had just been pursuing, and who might still be skulking in the neighborhood.

At the first trial he found the spot where he had parted from his companion, and discerned plainly the footprints which might have been overlooked by one less experienced in such matters. Lorrimer had stepped off in the direction of the city.

"Wonder if he did not understand me?" mused Mr. Jackson, as he followed after.

"I meant to tell him to stay where he was till I came back. Deuced unpleasant it might have been if there had been any foolishness with firearms, and he had moved himself into range. He can hardly have got scared and run away, though it does look somewhat that way. I don't often make a mistake in regard to a fellow I take up with, and I was inclined to like him at first sight. There is nothing for me to do but to follow him up, and see if he gets safely into cover. If he has any explanations to make it will be time enough to hear them in the morning. I should hate mightily to know that he was a coward, for I swear, I was actually beginning to grow confidential with him. If he didn't want to hear what I had to say he might have told me so without running away."

So Mr. Jackson thought as he went along; but his anger did not rise to any very great height, nor did his fears for the safety of the young man give him any great amount of trouble. When he arrived at the Golden Goat he learned from Chet Palmer, who was still on guard, that Lorrimer had reached the hotel and retired to his room. With that information Mr. Jackson closed the book of adventure for the night, and retired, also.

Before he was fairly composed for slumber there was a step without, which he knew by the sound must belong to Dennis. It came straight for his room, and the door was opened without any previous demonstration.

"Chet tells me that ye'r' aloive an' hearty, an' Oi thought Oi would lit yez know that Oi wor in the same boat. It moight save yez a nightmare later on."

"And how about the hundred dollars that I left subject to the turn? From the looks of things I should say you didn't come out second best, and from what I have heard of John he is a man who could be relied on to pay all bets when the decision came against him."

"Faith, an' Oi didn't wait to collect. Whin the opportunity ter leave orroyved Oi lift in the foorst boat, an' that same wor on account av the roising av a ghost. Whin Saintly Sam kim to loife the rist all fitt so much loike l'avin' that Oi got quoite in the fashion, an' wint along. Av ye would call on him in the mornin' no doubt he would fork over joost as well, an' manetoime Oi am saved no ind av danger, for a whalin' at ther club's ind by Mither Ready John wad be nixt door to dith. An' Oi'm free to pronounce, he wor the bist mon Oi iver met wid a stick."

"So Saintly Sam came to life, did he? I wonder if the fox was not shamming all the time? All right, Dennis. If there is anything more to be said about the century I will attend to it myself. I hated to leave you in such a racket, but you seemed bound that I should; and I was pretty sure you could take care of yourself, even if you did have to raise the dead to do it."

"An' the young jontleman? Did Oi onderstand that he came in wid yez or joost before yez? Sure, an' there wor something av a plot on foot, an' I'll bate yez, there wor fun afloat afoor long."

"Just so, Dennis. I didn't get there a whit to soon, though the plot was scarcely more serious than an intention to rob him of his money. I don't think he would have given it up without a fight, but if I had not turned up they would have got it all the same. He seemed to be a good little man, but I am not sure that he is as dead game as I would like in my acquaintances. He and I had a little fling around town afterwards, but he finally left me in the lurch just when there seemed a chance for business. If it was not such a horse to a hen looking affair I don't know but what I would call him to account in the morning."

"Sure, an' the bist plan wad be to l'ave him alone, ontirely, tell ye says what sort av a mon he is, onnyway. Oi fitt loike takin' his part whin it wor one ag'in' so many, but all the toime Oi thought that he wor a mon as moight work bad medicine av yez had too much to do wid him."

"Perhaps you are right. It does seem queer, though, how we took to him at first sight. And I was getting quite confidential with the little dude when that lucky diversion came. Blessed be the men that were skulking in the shadows! If they had not interrupted, I suppose that I would have been telling him my whole history as we went along; and by the time we got here, he would have known all about it. Go to bed, Dennis. There is nothing more on board to-night, and there will be time enough to talk in the morning."

Mr. Jackson's slumbers were not disturbed that night, and in the morning he took his time

to getting ready for breakfast. When there was nothing particular on the carpet he was never a very early riser.

It was some hours after his first meal that the Gent from Jaybird, having seen nothing of Lawrence Lorrimer in the mean time, took it into his head to inquire somewhat in regard to him, and he was astonished to learn that he had left the place in the early stage, and that by the time he was out of bed the young gentleman was probably half a dozen miles out of town.

"Something strange about it all," thought Mr. Jackson. "Begins to look as though he came here expressly to consult with the seeress, whose fame has no doubt gone abroad to the ends of the earth. Pity it is that I—well, no! What business is it of mine what was the subject he came to consult her concerning? I suppose the sorceress would tell me for a ten-spot; but the game would scarcely be worth the candle. I have had trouble enough already in taking an interest in other people's affairs, and I think for the future I will keep hands off. At the same time I am not sure that I will begin the reformation until after I have seen through the millstone of the Billy Binks affair. There is something singular about that Dandy Belle sale, and I ought to fathom the mystery before I stop."

The latter part was spoken aloud, and for the benefit of Dennis, who had just entered. The little Irishman, who was thoroughly posted in regard to the thoughts and intentions of the Gent from Jaybird, answered promptly:

"Av ye wor so much interested in the Dandy Belle Oi sh'd think ye would be afther lookin' at that same moine, yersilf. Ye might see as much in it as the nixt mon."

"That is so. I have been going on hearsay so far, and the thing may be better than its reputation. I was thinking more about poor old Billy than I was about his bargain. Because Kain let go of it is only a reason and not a proof that the thing won't pan out equal to its price. The old man might get out even, yet. I believe I will go out and see. And you, Dennis, had better come along. If I leave you here by yourself you will be sure to get into trouble, and just now we must walk circumspectly. I am expecting developments."

"In regard to the young ledly?"

"Exactly. There are indications that she is known in this neighborhood. I am willing to give up the theory that she was carried off by Colonel Snow, though it will be hard to explain the meaning of appearances as we found them. Of course, if I came across the man, I would shoot him on sight for the sake of general principles, though I fear it would be hard to prove anything worse against him than his being a road-agent."

"He moight be worse, av course; but that sames to be bad enough. Av ye would tell me phat those same indications are loike, Oi moight be able to give ye a hint. It's the outsiders that can explain the game whin the players only get the cards. The more Oi consider, the more singular it appears that the ledly should disappear joost whin ye wor about to get acquainted. Av ye can't foind her, sure an' it's not the loss that a regular swateheart wad have been, but no doubt it's bad enough."

"Your comfort is a little of the coldest, Dennis. If I can't find her? But I will find her—if for no other reason than to tell her that Cool Charlie never raised his hand against her father—in spite of what these schemers are preparing to tell her."

"Av ther' wor schamers who thought ye had lashin's av coin there's no tellin' what they moight not be stuffin' her wid av they thought it 'ould bring them a taste av the same. Sure, an' ye had betther hustle 'round, an' tell your sthory foorst. An' av ye would kape an oye on those same schamers it moight give ye a pint or two where to look for the swate damsel herself."

"True for you, Dennis, and I think I will make my arrangements accordingly. But, meantime, we will take our trip out to the Dandy Belle; and first and foremost you will have to look around for some information as to where the abominable hole is located. After all that has been said and done I have not the ghost of an idea as to where to look for it."

It really amounted to the same thing, whether Dennis or Mr. Jackson made the inquiries; but the latter felt a delicacy about approaching the subject after the notoriety he knew he had gained in connection with the sale; and Dennis could do the work better in any event. The latter went out in search of information; but returned in a very short time.

"Av what they towld me wor true it will be no thrick at all, at all, to foind the shpot. An' av it wor not, there will be some broken bones shortly afther me retourn. Come on wid ye, an' we'll get the businiss over in foine shape."

It was a pretty long tramp that the two had before them, but they were both accomplished pedestrians, and they made their way upward among the hills without lagging or complaint. As they went along Mr. Jackson became more and more thoughtful, replying to the chatter of his companion in monosyllables so frequently that Dennis grew tired of bearing himself talk, and for some miles they actually pressed on

without a word between them. Then, Dennis halted and catching the arm of the gent from Jaybird with one hand, he pointed downward with the other.

"Av they towld me the truth, an' Oi made no misthake, yander is the Dandy Belle claim, an' that mon looks loike Billy Binks."

"And, good Lord!"—looking carefully around—"if it ain't the mine we used to call the Alcazor! It has been half a dozen years since I saw the spot, but I cannot be mistaken!"

CHAPTER XII.

COLONEL SNOW SECURES A GUEST.

THERE was no mistake about the information which Mr. Jackson had received in answer to his queries regarding Lawrence Lorrimer. The outgoing stage that morning carried the latter young gentleman as a passenger, much to the disgust of Chet Taylor, who had already heard several versions of the affair at the Ready John Saloon, and had been anticipating no end of fun when Gigson returned, and he had a chance to pilot their guest around town.

As it happened, there were no other passengers on the stage that morning—a thing which was unusual. Lorrimer, who had slept but little the preceding night, expressed his satisfaction when he took in the situation, and stretched himself out for a nap, covering the interior of the coach after a fashion which showed that he was an adept in extracting comfort out of almost any position. It was not very long before he was sleeping gently but soundly, his body yielding easily to the swaying of the vehicle.

Now and then he partially awakened, and changed his position slightly, as though settling himself for his slumbers, but for the major part of an hour he paid no attention to his surroundings, and finally appeared to be totally oblivious of the outside world.

Then there was a lurch, a rattle of brakes, a shout from the driver, a plunge or two by the frightened teams. Lorrimer awoke with a start, to find that the coach had come to a sudden halt, and there was some one outside who was making an effort to demand his attention.

"Hillo! Hillo! What is the meaning of all this?" asked Lorrimer, as he thrust his head out of the nearest window.

"It means hands up, young man," was the instant retort. "Kinder queer you didn't hear the noise and the shouting long ago. You must have been asleep and dreaming."

"Correct you are, my friend. That is just what was the matter, or you never would have got the drop on me after this fashion. It seems to be too late to do anything but obey orders. If you are anything like as desperate as you look you would just as soon pull that trigger as not. Here is an adventure at the very send-off. Pity that I didn't come better prepared. Really, my friend, my pocketbook is as empty as your head, and unless you are willing to go along with me to the Gulch, where I am expecting a remittance, I do not think that I will be able to relieve your distress, or help so deserving a mortal on the way. You have your pains for your trouble. I assure you that your wisest course is to allow me to go on my journey unmolested, and trust to my generosity when I have reached the land of promise."

"Don't be glimflashy, young man. We know a trick worth two of that one. You will just step down and out, and go along with us. If there are any stamps of yours at Gordon's Gulch I reckon we can find some way to reduce them to possession; and the thing will be worked all the easier if you are not on the carpet to pull the other way. No foolishness now. Out with you, or taste lead! I am old business, chuck up; and when I speak, it all has to go, and don't you forget it."

The tones were harsh enough, even if the words were well chosen. Moreover, the situation was as Lorrimer had described it. The drop was on him, and any attempt at resistance would be likely to bring a shot which must be fatal. He yielded gracefully, and without a symptom of fear.

"The matter is in your hands, work it to suit yourself. If you say I am to step down, give me room, and the chance. Just recollect that I am coming at your own invitation. Don't be trying any snap-shots when I get the move up, since I assure you my motions are all intended to be pacific."

"Come ahead, then. There is no use to try any little game, because, if you do, we will drop you, sure. I have a brace of pards here who have their Winchesters trained your way. They won't use them till they have to, but if they pick trigger you are a goner. Step down, and no more nonsense."

Lorrimer knew what was the correct thing to do in such cases. He threw the door open, and then stepped out with his hands above his head, and his fingers empty.

The moment his feet touched the ground the road-agent turned to the driver:

"All right, my man. We are done with you. You are a jim-dandy to look after your own interests, and you want to keep up the same style as long as we are working this end of the road, and then you will save your bacon to the end of the chapter. Drive on, and see that you keep

your mouth shut about this little transaction until you get to the Gulch. After that you are at liberty to shoot off your mouth as much as you want to—for it wouldn't be in the nature of things for a driver to keep altogether quiet about such an adventure. Spread it abroad after that as fast and as far as you want to, that you have had an interview with the workmen of Colonel Snow, and that they have taken a hostage out of whom they expect to work both coin and safety. Drive on now, and don't you look back. You might get a slap in the face that would hurt."

The driver could see the rest of the road-agents, if Lorrimer could not, and as they were handling their Winchesters after a fashion that italicized the threat, he understood in what shape that slap would come, and wanted none of it. He dropped the braid vigorously on the backs of his chargers, and the coach swirled away, leaving Lawrence Lorrimer standing in the middle of the road, facing his captors, and feeling slightly uncomfortable, though by no means terrified.

"Sorry to have to play it rough on a gent of your nerve, but those are the orders. If you can ante up after a manner that will correspond with the deal we have been giving you, I suspect you will go away none the worse for the meeting."

"And if I can't?" asked Lorrimer, airily.

"Then it will be the worse for you. We don't run this mill for the sake of the fun that is in the game. But it is not my say-so. The captain is a little under the weather, and is unable to take the road; but he runs things all the same. Whatever he says will go. Come along!"

"Excuse me, but will the tramp be a long one? because one might as well die of the lead fever as to tramp till tired to death. And as the end will probably be that I will be turned adrift, afoot and alone, it seems a pity if I have to be taken far from the trail."

"You will find out all about that when the tramp is over. Sorry we can't call a cab; but the fact is, the road hardly admits of any progress that is not done on foot-back; and if it did we could not afford to patronize the line. Accept my arm, please, and step out lively. The colonel is waiting, and it will not do to keep him out in the morning air too long."

Lawrence took the proffered arm, and moved on briskly enough; but he found that the conversation was to be closed then and there. He could see no advantage in asking questions that were not answered, so he strode along as silent as his captors.

Perhaps the silence made the distance seem longer than it really was. At any rate, it appeared to be an hour or more from the time of the stoppage of the stage, when, on plunging downward toward a little clump of trees which grew in a dingle, he caught a glimpse of several men, apparently reclining on the ground.

The outlaw who had acted as spokesman called a halt by a slight pressure on the arm of the young man, while one of the others went forward. In a moment he came back far enough to be in sight, and then made a motion for the others to advance.

The men who made the attack on the stage were all masked, and dressed precisely alike. It would have been almost impossible to have told one from the other by any outward indication, and the two who started up to meet the little party differed in nothing from the rest, save for a little knot of blue ribbon which hung at the buttonhole of one of them.

"So you have him?" remarked this man, looking keenly at the prisoner. "Any resistance to speak of? And was there any outside profit?"

"All the profit there was out of the thing is what we are going to find wrapped up in this fellow's hide, and it don't look to me as though there would be much found there. He is your meat, though, so take him and do with him what you will."

"How is that, Lorrimer? You think these men estimate you at your true value? Don't be bashful about giving an opinion, as, whatever you say, it shall not cost you a cent."

"Is it worth while to keep up the farce? That is the question I would have answered before I venture an opinion."

Lorrimer was not astounded by the address, as the reader can perceive, although he had been hoping against hope that he would meet with some such reception.

"Speak out as you have a mind to. This is my venture, as one of my friends has remarked, and their share of the work was done on a fixed price, so that they are not concerned whether your pockets are full or empty. Sorry that I could not tip you a wink beforehand of what you were to look for on the road, but as it was necessary to deceive the driver perhaps it was as well. I have little doubt that everything was done as natural as life, and he will be taking all the affidavits that are necessary to convince the veriest doubter. So, welcome to the haunts of Colonel Snow, and prepare to rest in peace until the next development in the game."

Lorrimer looked as though he was puzzled. Moreover, he did not appear to be well pleased with the prospect before him. As the others had withdrawn at a signal from the captain, given while he was speaking, the field for remarks was unobstructed by their presence, and yet he remained silent.

"Don't like it, eh? Well, I assure you that your stay here will be of the most temporary character. It was necessary that you should disappear, for a few days at least, and though it is a little sensational, no doubt, I could think of no better plan than the same old one, even at the risk of working it to death."

"Then your message for me to come on at once to the Gulch was only a blind? You might have given me a hint. When you said it was life or death of course I started at once. Had you not been so urgent I might at least have followed up some little distance on the most promising lead I have yet struck. A day or two would not have made much difference."

"There is just where you are mistaken. We will work the lead, but we will work it together, and in a little different style from the way you contemplated. In other words, I propose that we find our way to Oro after some regular fashion, and accept what you have discovered as a starting point. Lawrence Lorrimer has outlived his usefulness; it is time that he retires. While the different parties who have their eyes on him are looking around to see what has become of him we can be getting in our work after the most approved fashion. But, first and foremost, did you interview Saintly Sam? And then, what did the witch tell you?"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MAN ON GUARD.

"SAINTLY SAM is dead," responded Lorrimer, gloomily. "I found him dying, and he was a corpse before he could answer the few questions I was framing. From the little I saw of his surroundings I suspect that he was killed to keep his tongue quiet, though whether it was on account of anything he might tell to me, or whether it was on some other account I could not be certain. Had I not overacted my part I might have learned more, and in answering your summons I probably threw away my last remaining chance. By the time we reach Oro, if you are bold enough, or foolish enough to go there, all traces of whatever he may have known or been concerned in, will have been lost."

"Dead, eh? Pity if 'twere true! Are you sure of it? The old sinner has as many lives as a cat, and I would hate to gamble deeply on anything in regard to him which I did not see. You did not wait to see him buried, so there is not an absolute certainty."

"I saw him die, which was just as convincing; and the crowd announced their serious intention to lynch me as an accessory to his departure. Had it not been for unexpected assistance it is possible that they would have put their purpose into effect."

"Let it go at that, for the present. I am not willing to give it up altogether. The fact of having found the man is too encouraging to allow us to lose hope, even if sitting on his tombstone. And the witch? Anything in her revelation that would make one believe she had knowledge worth the getting at?"

"She knows enough to be dangerous, though how much, it would be hard to say. The oracle at Delphos never spoke more ambiguously, nor uttered known truths with so uncertain a sound. She may know everything, or she may know only what seems on the surface to be the truth; but, however that may be, she is ready for us with a scheme of her own—and her backers. I need nothing more to convince me that we are at the beginning of the right track, and that we are to have more to fight than we bargained for. I am not sure but that she would do her best to aid me to find Ilma Merton. Otherwise she knows everything, and it is to be war from the send-off."

"When there is a million at stake you will find people ready for either peace or war, provided by either course the lion's share can be obtained. Be a little more particular. Let me know just what did happen, or just what was said. Perhaps I can bring a cooler judgment to bear on the interview."

"There is not much to tell, though there was a full hour consumed in getting over the ground. I may as well begin at the beginning, and let you know all that was said and done while I remained at Oro. Will you have it now, or shall we wait till we get to your headquarters? I suppose that you have some better tarrying place than this."

"Truly have I; and we will reserve the tale for our leisure. We had better retire before pursuit fairly sets in. Once get the trail broken and that will be the end of it."

"Perhaps. And yet, it may not be so easy to break the trail if a man like Mr. Jackson should choose to take it up. A queer sort of a round game it will be if I am trailing him, and he is following me!"

"And who, pray, is Mr. Jackson?"

"A gentleman with whom I have had some conversation and a little adventure. When I tell

you that I have discovered—indeed, he made no secret of the fact—that he is the man who was once known as Cool Charlie, you may understand how prosperous looking was the lead I was following when your message drew me away."

An ejaculation of surprise came from the lips of the other. The intelligence was so great a surprise that he was inclined to doubt. He hinted as much in the first few words he said after hearing the statement.

"No, there can be no doubt about it. And, more than that, the fortune-teller was aware of the fact. He told me so himself, and if one can judge from the hints which he let fall, she must have accused him of having murdered the master of the Alcazor. He denied it, of course; but under the circumstances, would that count?"

"Perhaps if I knew the circumstances I would be better able to answer that question. This is important, I will admit; and I want to hear your story from start to finish at one heat. Say nothing more for the present. I do not want to have my judgment warped by a partial statement. We have not much further to go, and you have told me enough to keep my mind busy until we get to the end of our present journey. I begin to think that Ramah knows too much not to have been on the ground. Who can she be?"

"All I can tell you about that is that she looks as though she might be a woman both young and handsome. She must have been but a child at the time of the murder at the mine."

"Don't be too sure of that. She holds her soires by lamplight, and the illumination is none too bright. If she is as shrewd about making up her face as she is about other things, there could be no trusting to appearances. Still—a woman, young and handsome, who knows about the affair of the Alcazor, and recognizes Cool Charlie at sight! In truth, you were hot on the scent, and if I had only known, I should not have called you away—not for a day or so more, at least."

"It is too late for regrets. They never pay after the time has passed to remedy a mistake. One thing seems to have been made tolerably certain. We are warm on the trail, and it will lead us to what we have been expecting—revenge and gold. And yet, this Jackson scarcely seems a man who would commit a deliberate murder. He might take life, but from what I have seen of him, I should say that he would want some excuse to justify himself in his own mind. For the balance of the world I should say he cares not two pins."

Although the man in the mask had requested Lorrimer to give him a chance to think, it seemed that he was hardly as anxious for silence as he had thought. His answers came in the shape of more questions. One word suggested another; and though they were going along at a rapid walk, so that they lost no time, they were paying more attention to each other than to the things around them.

A sharp order to halt brought them back to their surroundings. Lawrence Lorrimer looked up in the direction of the voice, and saw that once more he was covered by the muzzle of a Winchester, held by a man in a mask, who spoke in as determined a manner as his predecessor had done.

"All right, Dan," interposed Colonel Snow. "This is the guest I was looking for, and as he came without trouble, and no one else was interfered with, I do not think there is much danger of pursuit. Still, it may be as well to keep an extra sharp lookout. In case you see anything suspicious, fire and fall back to your horse. The rest of us will be ready to look out for ourselves. In this case we will show light heels rather than a bold front."

"Maybe that's all right, and then again, p'raps it ain't. We hev bin talkin' ther matter over a bit, betwixt ourselves, an' it are kinder runnin' in our minds thet ye'r' gittin' ready ter slide, and ain't carin' much whether we come along on ther same alley, er git sbifted off on another line, whar ther' are more ropes than duckats, an' no lack ov han's ter handle 'em. You kin pass in, all right, but I thort it war no more ner fair, after all thet hez passed betwixt you an' me, thet I give yer a hint thet when yer gits in it won't be jest so easy ter git out onless some more ov ther boys comes with yer."

"What is the meaning of this?" asked the colonel, with hasty sharpness. "Certainly you do not mean to accuse me of treachery? The idea is too ridiculous. You know that I am as deep in the mire as any of you."

"That is just what we don't. We don't know much about yer. Ef we did it might make a difference. But some ov ther boys war jest a-sayin' thet ef we met yer to-morrer somewhar else, and with a different lot ov duds on, ther chances are ten ter one we wouldn't know yer. You come an' go, an' when you ain't hyer that's ther last ov yer. When yer gits through with us, what's ter hinder yer sellin' us all out ter make yerself safe? I'm playin' my hand all open an' above-board. It's no more ner fair ter give yer a chance ter make yerself squar' with ther boys, an' ther' are no one ez would be gladder than me ef yer would do that same thing. Ez long ez I kin I want ter foller yer lead, but

thar's nothin' kin lead me ter go back on the gang. I owe you one er two, but fur them I'm owin' it by ther dozen. We bin pards too long ter leave 'em fur ther sake ov a new man, onless he hed saved my life a dozen times over 'stead ov once."

Dan spoke in the most matter-of-fact tones, and never seemed to think that he might be running some risk. He had dropped the muzzle of his gun, and was leaning back carelessly against a rock. No doubt it was the truth, that he desired to give his commanding officer a hint of the feeling which had formed in regard to him; and he did it without fear or favor.

The colonel was not in the least alarmed, so far, at least. He listened calmly to the rather lengthy explanation. When it was done his answer was ready, without a trace of anger or bitterness in it.

"Some gentleman has been at work, who has an eye to the succession. I do not think it would be hard to locate him, but I am not concerned. When I came down among you tiger cubs, and offered to pilot you all to booty, I knew that I was taking my life in my hands, and the longer I stayed with you the more fully I was convinced that I could continue to hold it there. If you choose you can tell the men that you have spoken with me on this subject, and that when they get tired of following my lead I am ready to retire; but, so long as I am chief, they will continue to obey me, and when I want to go I will go, and when I want to come I will come. Otherwise, there will be some blood spilled. Have you anything more to say? If not, we will pass on."

"All right! Pass! It's not my doings, and I thought it was no more ner right ter give yer ther hint, an' ter say thet ov course I were goin' with ther boys. But, 'slong ez thar are no break, yer kin depend on me. An', I mou't say, thet ef I war you, an' knowed ther hull inn'ardness ov w'ot hez bin goin' on while yer war away, I'd hev my guns mighty handy when I went inter that camp ag'in. They're all thar, an' yer kin see thet they look ez though they hed suthin' on their minds. So long! Hope things will go all right, an' I wish I could tie ter yer, but yer kin see fur yerself thet it wouldn't be fair ner squar' fur me ter go back on 'em. Maybe you'll come out all right, anyhow. Ef not, don't worry about yer graveyard, fur I promise ter see yer planted all right. I kin do that much, anyhow."

"Thanks. I understand you well enough, and if you keep out of the way when the frolic begins—if there should be one—I assure you that I will not turn around to take you in as long as your gun don't point in my direction. Come on, Lorrimer. It seems that the rats have been playing, and the sooner the cat gets back the sooner they can be reduced to order."

"But, is that fellow in earnest?" asked Lawrence, in a low tone, as soon as they were out of easy hearing distance. "If he is, it strikes me that this is not the most comfortable place in the world that you are bringing me to. I am not sure it would not be best for both of us to turn around before it is too late, and take the back track. By the way, how many are there in the gang?"

"About a dozen; but this is a case in which numbers do not count against a righteous cause. I have been looking for something of the kind of late, and they can't take me off my guard. If it is funerals they are yearning for I can supply the corpses longer than they can keep up the mourners. All you will have to do will be to keep out of the range of stray bullets—if you can—and watch how the thing works. Faith! It would be as good a way as any to wind up the band."

"And have we much further to go?"

"Just a step. In fact, we are there now. And there are the malcontents. If they will only open the ball at once this thing can be settled in a minute by the clock."

And as if in answer to his wish the group of a dozen men faced about, each with his weapon in his hand.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SUPPRESSION OF A REVOLUTION.

LORRIMER had scarcely more than glanced at the surroundings as they moved onward toward what seemed to be a favorite though temporary retreat. At the same time, things were impressed fully on his mind; he knew the way in, and was pretty sure that he knew the way out. When he saw the move of the gang his first thought was that in case retreat was necessary he would probably have to shoot the sentinel, but that for the rest the way would be plain enough sailing, even though it offered some intricacies.

Meantime, he was anxious to know what course his guide intended to pursue. It seemed hardly possible that they could hold their own against a dozen unless they had the benefit of a surprise, and it would not do to begin shooting until war had been in some way declared. The situation was full of delicacy, and he wished he was somewhere else.

Wishing did not help the matter any, and in another instant it was too late for retreat. The

colonel stepped boldly forward, and with empty hands.

"What is this that Dan has been telling me? Is there going to be war and rebellion? If so, the sooner it comes the sooner it will be settled whether I am still the chief, or whether there is a better man here than I. Speak up, some one, and let me know what this means."

Perfectly careless was he of the leveled weapons, nor did he appear to notice that the whole squad moved toward him as one man, their revolvers ready for instant use.

"Thar's nothin' mealy-mouthed about Dan," said one who took upon himself the position of spokesman. "Ef yer give him time ter talk he let yer hev ther hull story. It are jest this way. We don't trust yer no longer, an' it's ther rule ov ther band that when ther' are a pard ez we can't trust it's time fer him ter make hisself squar', er else ter go out ov ther dew. That rule works all 'round, captain er no captain, an' you kin consider yerself under arrest till this thing are straightened out."

"Under arrest for what?" asked the colonel, in a voice full of scorn. "Since I took things in charge you have had a run of luck and a depth of prosperity that you are not able to bear. You think that if you can rid yourselves of me there will be bigger dividends for those who are left, and that perhaps my share of the spoils we have gathered in can be unearthed for your benefit. And Happy Jack has taken a notion that he could run things as well for half the money. That is the way it stands with those of you who are in this mix. Now, show your hands, all of you, and let me know who goes with the rebels. There is another law that applies right here. The man who kicks when on duty drops to the revolver of the chief, and I will see that it is enforced, if I have to wipe you all up, and start out to gather in a new band. When I can no longer rely on the men that are around me, I want a change—and I will have it, too, at any cost."

"That is fine talk, kunnel, but thar are a dozen ov us; an' when et comes ter wipin' up you kin see what sorter a chance thar would be fur you. You better throw yer hands up, right quick, fur we have yer foul!"

"Not this morning, my boys, unless you can show a better reason than any you have given yet. Vague suspicion won't do to set up such a lay-out on. Put your fingers to the spot where I have broken any of our laws or laid myself open to suspicion, and I will throw up my hands quick enough. Until you do I shall take care of my head the best I know how—and that will be well enough for such a gang as this."

"Ef yer must know it we kin give yer word an' proof. We bin s'picionin' fur some time that it warn't all right, an' now we're purty sure ov it. You want ter make a clean sell-out, an' git away with your share ov ther plunder. An' this hyer young feller that yer war so keeful about gittin' inter camp 'thout ary one knowin' ther how er ther wherefore—w'ot's ther matter with his bein' a 'tective, come down hyer ter arrange the bargain, an' count off ther noses? Tell us who he is an' w'at's his bizness hyer an' we will begin ter talk all over ag'in."

The colonel broke into a laugh as he turned toward his companion.

"I swear, this is an idea! Shall I tell them what they want to know? Nothing else will shake the belief which has got into their fool heads, and if I gave it to them straight it might give me the whip hand over them for a few more weeks, though I can never trust my tigers again, since they have once shown their teeth."

There was a ring in the voice of the colonel that showed his laughter went no deeper than his lips, and that he hardly expected a yes in answer to his proposition.

If such was the case he was certainly not disappointed in Lorrimer's reply. The young man had recovered his coolness, so far as it had been shaken, and he had certainly shown no great alarm.

"Don't consider me at all in this matter. I came here against my will, and I look to you to get me out of the scrape; but if you cannot do it without trucking to a parcel of knaves like these I will take the matter in my own hands, I may make a mess of it, to be sure, but I rather suspect that the luck which has been with me all my life is not going to fail me now. Just consider me as safely back in Oro, and run things the best you know how till you get tired. After that, call on me. There are numerous guns in front of us, to be sure; but are there men behind them? If they intend to come closer they had better shoot now, or they may not have the chance."

"Don't bluff them too hard, or you will take the matter off my hands with a vengeance. Of course I was only joking. This is a rebellion, no doubt, but I think it will be a bloodless one for our side. How it will be for the other is a serious question which the sooner they put to the test the better I will be satisfied. I have nothing particular to claim my attention just now, but I certainly do not intend to stand here brawling."

The outlaws had halted, and when the colonel turned toward Lawrence they watched the conversation with keen interest, as though they

thought it might tell them something about the suspicions they had advanced. Their weapons were still at a ready, and it looked as though it would be impossible for the two to escape death in case they refused to obey the order to surrender.

Then, like a flash, the hands of the colonel dove into the pockets in the skirt of his coat.

"All of you!" he shouted. "Hands up yourselves! Shoot, you brutes, or give up your guns!"

The skirts of the colonel's coat were slightly elevated as he spoke, and there was not a man in front of him who did not understand the meaning of the challenge. He was willing to risk a broadside; but at the first flash two of them would drop. They had seen their captain use his firearms more than once, and knew that he never missed his aim. The question was on which two did he hold the drop? If it had been an outsider there might have been less hesitation; but these men were accustomed to think in moments of danger, and in that instant every man of them thought that the drop was on the most important of the insurgents, and that he was first of all.

Under such circumstances, and considering that the battle had not actually been joined, there was a hesitation upon which the colonel had counted. The guns were at a ready, but they were not aimed. Had they risked a snap-shot when the hands of the colonel started on their downward way, some one might have tumbled him over before he could do mischief, but now it was too late. The one man bluffed the dozen, and though the insurrection was not quelled it had received a formidable check!

The fact that Lorrimer stood watching the proceedings with a smiling face had its effect. If he had made a move toward producing a weapon it would have precipitated matters beyond a doubt. They knew nothing of him save that he was an object of suspicion though they felt it would be dangerous to lose time when he began to make ready.

"Hands up!" again shouted the captain, as though, for the first time his anger was really rising.

"I have been waiting to see how far you would really go, though I think I thoroughly gauged your courage, each and every one of you, long ago. Now, I mean just what I say. Knuckle under or make ready to fight me one and all of you! I care not how you come, one at a time, or all together. This thing is to be settled here and now, and within the next minute or two. When I can't manage my men I die trying to do it, and I take as many as I can out of the damp as I go along. How many that will be, you can guess, if you don't waste too long a time doing it. My hands are on a pair of thirty-twos, and that means ten men. It will be lively for the other two, burying the corpses; but which one of you are those two going to be? I'll lay you the odds that it will not be any of those skulking in the rear. I'll look after them as well as the rest. Ah, I see you are willing to listen to reason! The hands are beginning to raise. That's right! Only a few more left, and they of the same sort. Now then, talk quick, while I am in a good humor. What do you propose to do about this? What is the best you will offer to have me let you off? I swear, I feel like giving you a chance as we have been pards together for some time and you are not a half bad set of fellows when you don't have a bee under each of your bonnets. You are the leading man in all efforts at internal improvement. Speak up, Happy Jack! If I hung you do you think the rest of them would behave themselves forever after?"

A leader among such men should be a physiognomist. Colonel Snow was one. As he went along with his address he could read the thoughts of the fellows as well as though they had spoken them aloud. He saw that to their minds he was not half so distasteful as he had been before he presented the arguments of the five-shooters in his coat pockets. They began to think that he was a good sort of a captain, after all, and one that they could get along with, and continue to trust after a fashion. If he was willing to say quits, and let things go on as they had been going, they were almost content. One after another the hands went up, and those of Happy Jack were highest of all. To be sure, there were still rifles in the hands that had held them, but the weapons were turned sideways, and actually looked harmless, so changed were the manners of their owners.

When Happy Jack was singled out as the victim the rest drew a breath of relief, and waited patiently to hear his answer. No one else wanted to speak, and yet silence was not to be thought of.

"Yer' 'way off, captain," answered Jack without the least hesitation. "Et's true I bin doin' a lot ov ther talkin', but that's 'cause it's kinder my nature ter be on ther chin, an' when thar's anything started ther rest hold back tell they kin see what sort er a face I kin put on it. We kinder thort that you wanted ter bu't ther gang, an' warn't so sure w'ot way yer would take fur doin' ov it. Seemed ter look sorter s'picious, an' it war better ter have it out with yer, an' not go pokin' round in ther

dark tell it war too late. It wa'n't that we wanted ter go back on you, but that we war afeard that you war goin' ter shake us. Ef you kin overlook ther leetle mistake, we kin all be ez happy ag'in ez clams et high water. Ef not, an' it'll make things any more sosherable like, w'y, hang me an' welcome. I wouldn't want ter go over ther range afore I saw all things fixed up as they used ter woz; but ef it are ther only way, I kin. Fix it up ter suit; an' ary way Happy Jack are willin'."

"Ha, ha! You are willing to sacrifice yourself for the good of your country! There is patriotism for you. All right! We will let it go at this; but I will give you one bit of warning. If there is ever any more trouble of this kind, and you don't put me up to it before I find it out, I'll shoot you on sight, if it costs me my own life. And I tell you all that I will continue to go and come as I wish, and if it don't seem to suit you, you will all be lying alongside of Happy Jack, when he goes to rest with the angels. Jack will continue to be lieutenant as before and the first thing for him to do will be to send out three to patrol the road, and pick up information if there is any to be had. My friend and I will be here for a few hours, and it is important that we know whether there is any pursuit—though it is hardly to be expected. It is not far from dinner time, and perhaps you had better take a bite before you start, and report here by five o'clock. I will start a little later. And I can tell you that I have in my mind a greater coup than any we have yet made. Those that want to have share in the spoils had better be on their good behavior; and I can tell you, the booty is going to be something worth trying for. That is all I can say now, but on my return you will all hear the full particulars of the scheme."

CHAPTER XV.

COLONEL SNOW KNOWS BETTER.

As the proverb has it, after the storm comes a calm. After an outbreak, which had been so bloodlessly suppressed, everything was serene about the outlaws' retreat. The dinner which followed in course of time was not much better or worse than the average dinner to be met with at the frontier hotels with which Lorrimer had made an acquaintance, so that he ate with the relish which comes from a good appetite, even if he did keep one hand ready to drop to a revolver, and think of questioning the colonel about the probability of the cook having put poison in the coffee. He allowed no outward manifestation of his uneasiness to appear, however; and to the critical eye was every whit as unconcerned as his host.

The situation was not altogether comfortable to a person who was not only not of the outlaws, but who had never before been brought into intimate relations with people of that class. The colonel, of course, was as hardened as any of them in heart; but in manners he was different; and heretofore Lorrimer had seen nothing of him as the outlaw at home. The young man was rather glad when appetite was satisfied, and after giving a few directions to Happy Jack, who accepted them without the least question, the chief drew his arm within his own.

"And now, my dear uncle, I hope that at last you are ready to explain what you had in view when you called me away to discuss a matter of life and death. You have had my story; I am waiting not very patiently for yours."

They had moved away from the men, who saw them depart without any sign of uneasiness. The camp was in a little dingle, reached by a path which led along a narrow ravine, or minor canyon, and as the men were clustered at the opening the two made their way further into the *cul-de-sac*, and finally threw themselves upon the ground, at a spot where they could command the approaches, and yet out of sight and hearing of the rest.

The colonel did not at once answer. At dinner-time he, as well as the men, had unmasked, and Lorrimer now had an opportunity to view his features. Evidently he was carefully considering the outlook, and making up his mind as to the course which he would pursue, with all due deliberation.

He was not a bad-looking man, and a stranger seeing him without a knowledge of what his past life had been would hardly have supposed that he was the leader of a band of outlaws, and had won for himself an unenviable reputation.

"My well-beloved relative," he responded, at length, "I have about decided to turn over a new leaf. Of course, there is a question whether it can be done, but I am willing to take the risk and try. There are several unsettled scores which may be raked up against me at any time, to say nothing of this little matter of brigandage, at which I have been trying my best to make a living and lay by something for coming old age. And I might add that I have been signally favored since I embarked in the business. Those ungrateful wretches have taken one moiety, and in the six months we have hung together it reached a sum beyond their wildest dreams before they knew me. Even I have begun to find what an amount can be

gathered in from the treasure-boxes of the Express companies, and the pockets of private individuals, by due and diligent attention to business.

"But, that fails to satisfy; to say nothing of the risk. I may meet some brute who is quicker on the trigger than I am, and who would be willing to stain his hands with the blood of a fellow mortal, for the sake of keeping a little of the yellow dross, the love of which is supposed to be the root of all evil. And then, the associations are not exactly what I would desire. The men are illiterate, treacherous, and as discontented a set of knaves as you would wish to see. The little breeze which you witnessed was but a specimen of what I must expect if I remain with them. There will always be a Happy Jack who is itching to stand in my shoes; and there will always be fools to think that he can fill them as well as I, if not better. When we accidentally met—after you had hunted for me from Dan to Beersheba—I told you frankly that it would not be for your interest to take any stock in your unworthy uncle; and that while I sympathized with you in your intention to find the wretch who killed my brother—and the wealth he was supposed to have left behind him—and had taken some steps in that direction myself, before I became too deeply entangled in the road-agent business, you could look for but little assistance from me, since I hardly dared venture to show myself freely in the neighborhood of the region where the Alcazor was supposed to have been located.

"I told you that Saintly Sam might be able to give you some valuable information if he would; and now that you assure me that he is dead, I may say that while personally I fear no man, so long as it is a fair controversy with knife and revolver, he was the one individual I was not ready to meet. The old villain would have recognized me under any disguise, and taken a fiendish delight in giving me away. As he is out of the road I feel more than ever determined to carry out the scheme I had in view when I sent for you. We will drop out of this and leave no trace. We will try a cast in Oro together; and if the points I have picked up since we last met have a shadow of truth for a foundation, I think the Alcazor can be found, and the gentleman who prepared Dan Daniels for the obsequies can be sent over the range after the most approved style. Before that decision is put in practice, however, it is necessary that we should have a little understanding. I am aware that the Merton family can carry on a vendetta as thoroughly as the bluest blood in old Kentucky, and that it is my duty to avenge the death of my lamented brother; but to do this will require certain sacrifices and risks; and I must have some compensation beyond the satisfaction of having done my duty. I propose to help you through with the affair without question until the treasure is found, and the man—Cool Charlie, if that is the name he went by in those days—is found and disposed of. But, recognizing your superior rights in the matter, I must have my share in the hidden million. You understand that I can go down and shoot half a dozen Cool Charlies without question or interference from the community; but when it comes to the subject of a million, more or less—and it will probably be considerably less—we can expect to have to fight from the word go."

Lorrimer had listened with attention, and the point to which the colonel was drifting had been apparent some time before he made this frank confession. It did not seem to trouble him a bit.

"If there is such a treasure, as I have reason to believe there is, it is part of my plan to unearth it; but that of itself would never have induced me to enter into this wild life, or train eye and hand to guard my head among a set of brutes with whom it is purgatory to mix. I recognize that you can aid me to the end I have in view, and I would only be too glad for you to find a fortune, in the hopes that it would save you from a life that is so unworthy of you. Consider that part settled. What next?"

"You have looked over the ground in one guise, now we will go together, and see what is to be done. Lawrence Lorrimer can put in an appearance at odd times, if you prefer; but Maud Daniels, and her uncle, would, in my opinion, stand a better chance of meeting with success."

"Maud Daniels?"

Lorrimer looked strangely at his companion, and in his tones there was an accent of wonder.

"Yes. As the relatives of the deceased it will be necessary to bear the same name; or, better at least. You remember, of course, that it is Dan Daniels we are to look for—or his traces, and his effects. Saintly Sam may have told some of his pards about a certain high-toned Merton he had met with; but providentially he knows nothing of the relationship, and I can step out with as grand an air as I choose when I get on the proper plumage. And Maud Daniels, lately arrived from the effete East, would receive more respectful attention than would be accorded a young man like Lawrence Lorrimer. Fortunately, I have preserved your baggage, and had it stored in an accessible spot, where the transformation can be made without any-

one being the wiser, and I also have a garb that will better suit my own part. When we drop out of here the disappearance will be utter and complete, and unless you have become a great deal more fascinated with the unmentionables than I think, you will hardly care to don them again."

Lorrimer looked at his uncle, at first with wonder, then with an air of amusement on his face. At the conclusion of the proposition, he broke into a low, but unmistakably genuine laugh.

"Ha, ha! Do I really understand you that I am to appear as a female, in this quest? A magnificent sort of a young lady I would make! And how well I would be likely to sustain the character! Before I had been in Oro an hour I would forget my garb, and be trying to even up with some of the wretches to whom, even in my short stay of last evening, I found myself owing one or two. There are sharp eyes there, don't you make any mistake about it; and they would detect the fraud before I had been among them a day."

"Nonsense! Why should you try that on with me? You have got into your present character better than I would have dreamed you could; and did I not know the facts in the case I might be deceived. There are few women with such nerve—not one in a thousand could have taken so coolly the late episode in the outlaws' camp—and I watched you with more interest than I did the brutes I was holding at the muzzles of my hidden revolvers. You scarcely changed color, and I could see that you were ready to shoot when I dropped the bat. You are a woman after my own heart, and I could find it in me to regret the nearness of the relationship which debars me from ever hoping for a still nearer one. I have seen something of you in your true colors, but I never dreamed that you could show off to such advantage when you changed your garb. I even warned you to that effect, as you will remember. Your training has been even better than you claimed; and I would want no better pard to stand behind me anywhere than just Lawrence Lorrimer. But, at the same time, there are other circumstances to be considered, besides mere accidents of nerve and good shooting. I will attend to that part of the affair, and Maud Daniels will have other work to do. You need not, by the way, appear in the matter as Ilma Merton. When you change your name, it will be as well to alter your general appearance. It makes no difference whether Maud is fair or dark; and for fear that you have given yourself away in your former character, I would really prefer a liberal application of cosmetics, and a general change of appearance. When we once strike it rich, and get down to bedrock, all that can be explained to the world at large, in case there seems to be any necessity for it. How is it to be? Will you trust me to run this matter after my own light—always under consultation, of course—or must I give it up, and leave you to work out your ends unaided by me?"

And without hesitation, but with the same careless laugh, though in slightly altered, and almost feminine tones, Lorrimer responded:

"Have it your own way. Bring on your petticoats, and I will try to do credit to their former owner."

CHAPTER XVI.

A ROAD FOR RETREAT.

"It seems like a pity," remarked the colonel, thoughtfully, as he was confiding to his companion his plans for dropping his gang entirely out of sight. I have been training them up in the way they should go for the last six months, and though they are still restive under the harness, they are just getting into shape for work. We have done well; but nothing like what we could do with opportunity and anything like luck. Actually, the thought of leaving them for good makes me almost weep. I can look around a long while before I can get together as good a gang—for the purpose."

"If you are going to regret them so, drop the matter altogether. I can carry it out to the bitter end, and save the credit of the family unaided, even if it is as much your duty as mine. I do not wish to insult you by speaking as though it could be a mere matter of money with you, yet this I might add: that if I succeed in unearthing the treasure for which my uncle—"

"Your father, if you please. It may be as well to begin to be realistic at once. It may save a slip of the lip hereafter."

"As you will. The treasure for which Dan Daniels was murdered, but which failed to fall into the murderer's hands. If I succeed, I say, it will belong as much to you as to me, whether its discovery is owing to your aid or not. And by the agreement that was made in the family before the venture was made, Ilma Merton, were she living—as I begin to believe she may be—would only be entitled to a third."

"Correct, as usual. For the filthy dross alone I care nothing; but, you understand, it may be needed in case there are any afterclaps when I have dropped out of this business. And then, I ought to have some compensation for the sacrifices I am making. Unfortunately, this is a business of which I cannot sell the good-will,

and it can hardly be worked up again to the same profitable condition if the present chances are allowed to go by the board. I once more accept the munificent offer—with the more gratitude because it is a fraud assurance that the rights I actually have will be protected. Let that drop now. We understand each other fully, and there will be no use to divert our attention from the main issue. No doubt, the rights of the fair Ilma will be protected until it is certain that she will not turn up—but it is understood that if there are any transformations the title to the estate does not pass with them. I am not figuring to throw too many dollars into your pocket. If you are Ilma, Ilma you will remain till the estate is settled; or, as Lawrence Lorrimer you will draw your share."

"Exactly. You do not suppose that the scheme which you have proposed should react against you. All right. If I draw a share as Ilma I shall not claim one as Lorrimer; and if a better owner for the name should turn up it will not be hard to offer an explanation, backed by the solid facts, which will make all serene. That much is understood; and as the matter has been pretty thoroughly discussed, and all the different parts made plain, the next, and probably only question for me to ask, is, when do you propose to move on the enemy's works? I confess that I am not enjoying my stay here, and cannot help but think the sooner we get out of this the better. We may have to do a good deal more slaughter than I care to have on my conscience if we wait till they have time to take a second thought about the way the rebellion was subdued. No man likes to think he has been beaten by sheer bluff; and there is nothing which will sooner make him fighting mad. Happy Jack may come again; and in a more desperate fashion. That may be all right for you; but I don't care about such an imbroglio."

"Have no fears. I have the whip hand of the dogs, and even if they should try to bite, I think there would be no need for bloodshed."

The colonel was in no apparent hurry to develop his plans about leaving. In fact, the matter of what the gang would say or do was altogether a thing of minor importance, since he cared little for open resistance, such as they would be likely to make; and he knew pretty well that none of them would care to risk their precious necks in Oro, and that they would hardly be able to recognize him, even if they followed him up. So far, he had been more concerned in making sure of his own interest in the bonanza, for which the two were to make a search. And his plan was, so far as formed and explained, to try Oro, and pick up any information that might be available.

"Then, why waste time in this miserable sort of a picnic? The sooner we reach the place the better it will be. I may be able to take up the end of the thread where you broke it off."

"True enough; but at the same time I have a great deal of respect for the old proverb about the more haste bringing the less speed. It is not likely to make much difference to you; but with me it is different. The rest of my life will perhaps depend on how I manage the next dozen hours. I trust you thoroughly, you see. You are one of the family, and there is no danger that you will ever want to claim that a relation of yours was once the famous Colonel Snow. The rest of the world I intend to leave in the dark. The trail between where the life of the outlaw ends, and where the life of the senior survivor of the Mertons begins again, will be short; but there must not be footprints which will give a pointer to any casual passer along that road. You understand?"

"Well enough. Have it as you will. If there must be any mystery between us at all, it is as well that it should be now as later on. If you have nothing further to say that will throw light on the objects of our mutual quest, we may as well save words, and spend the time in rest, which, I confess, I begin to need badly enough. Your ruffians woke me out of the finest nap I have had a chance to enjoy for some time. The little sleep I had last night hardly counted when you look at the big hole the last week or so has been making in the general average."

"Sleep, then, and I will go back to my turtle-doves, and see how gently they are cooing. There will be an explanation or two to make to them, and now would be as good a time as any. They must understand that I have a scheme on foot for the benefit of them all; and I think, indeed, that I have a profitable piece of work laid out for them, which may reconcile them to my loss, if I should not return."

He spoke carelessly and turned away. At the same time he was watching Lorrimer over his shoulder, to see how the idea of being left alone was probably going to strike him.

There was not a spark of concern visible on the face of the young man, who dropped lazily back upon the sward, and closed his eyes.

"Humph!" said the colonel, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Man or woman, old or young, the member of the Merton family who gets into an unpleasant predicament never allows it to interfere with his rest or digestion. I could swear to the blood when I saw how coolly the little racket was taken, and that abandon now is the sure enough

thing. If there was to be a regular cyclone of desperadoes along here in the next half-hour, all thirsting for blood, the rest would be none the less sweet. That is the kind of an individual I like to tie to. I don't suppose there will be much affection wasted on a recalcitrant member of the family like myself; but I will not be afraid that there will be any danger of betrayal in the house of that friend. If all the world knew the truth, what a wretched sort of a world it would be, anyhow. Lasting friendships would be mighty scarce; and it is possible that my chances for a long lease of life would be considerably slimmer than I hope they are."

Then the philosopher went back to his turtle-doves, as he had called them, and left Lawrence to his own devices.

For some hours Lorrimer slept, with a soundness that was good proof of the truth of what he said. When he awoke the day was almost at a close, and the colonel was standing near.

"All right, old man!" was his salutation.

"Things are in shape, and I hope that you are ready for the road. Here is all the supper you will be likely to get to-night, and I would advise you to put yourself on the outside of it as rapidly as possible. It is almost time that we started on our travels. There is a point on the way which I wish to strike at precisely the right moment—of course five or ten, one way or the other, will not make much difference—and that point passed, the rest will be tolerably plain sailing."

"I am ready," answered Lorrimer, springing to his feet.

"If there is any danger point to pass, why not start in time to make sure of daylight?"

"You don't take in the situation. The road leads one way; and I am going to travel another. There are some little difficulties about it, but nothing that a Merton ought not to be able to surmount. The point is that I do not wish to run the risk of any one seeing the divergence from the true path. The guards and patrols turn up at stated times, and it would be awkward to have them see us just as we were getting over the fence. I think I have the thing figured down to about the right hour; but if there is any mistake it will have to be rectified, that is all."

"Better have no mistakes to be amended. I leave it in your hands."

"Oh, I will attend to the matter, however it may go. I see you have touched the flask but lightly. Put it in your pocket for an emergency. The supply is limited, and I have no fancy for the article going to waste."

"Thanks, awfully, for the intended self-denial; but I have a private vial of my own, which I have as yet found no occasion to taste, though at one time it did seem as though I would either have to do that or go over the range."

"Ah, I am doubly surprised. The male members of the family generally need no compulsion when they are asked to surround a sample of genuine old Bourbon; while those of the gentler sex who bear the name prefer to handle it with tongs if it must be done at all. Ilma never had a flask in her hip pocket; and her father would not have carried it there long. If he had a besetting sin it was not that of total abstinence."

The colonel accepted his flask, and stowed it carefully away. Then he turned toward what seemed to be the solid rock.

"This way. Colonel Snow goes to his destiny. If he ever reappears on the stage of action it will be at the end of a rope. The history of his reformation is still to be written, but I predict that it will be lively reading when it has gone to press."

He ceased speaking, and with Lorrimer close at his heels, entered a narrow passageway, which opened out before them when least expected.

CHAPTER XVII.

HOT QUARTERS.

THE colonel had so freely confessed to a total lack of principle that it would have been small blame to Lawrence Lorrimer had he felt a hesitancy about following him along what he understood was a dangerous trail. True, there was a close relationship existing between them, and the colonel had spoken of the strength of the ties of blood, which in the past had bound together the Merton family so strongly that to strike one of its members was to insure a blow from all of them. But considering the business in which the colonel had lately been engaged, and the conditions he had insisted on before being willing to move, it might well be doubted whether he was a man to be trusted under any circumstances.

"No hesitancy, however, did Lawrence Lorrimer show; and he followed his guide with a cheerful alacrity which showed how glad he was to leave the spot.

The pathway was narrow and broken. A horse might have made its way over the ground; but it would have been uncomfortable, not to say dangerous for its rider. On either side was a straight wall of rock, which went upward for some distance, and then seemed to come together again, though that was hardly possible, since there was a subdued twilight in the place, show-

ing that some daylight managed to struggle downward. Here and there the way was almost barred by a mass of rocks which had dropped from above, or been left when the natural road was riven out of the solid rock by the hand of nature.

Rod after rod the two pressed on, the way never varying in its width, though tortuous in its windings, until they came at length to a spot where the overhanging roof became solid in fact as well as appearance, and the twilight changed quickly into utter darkness.

"Keep close behind me now, and when I give the word you want to stop short. I may miss my calculations by a yard or so and that would bring us into close quarters. The boys carry a torch when they go through here, but I don't want to give ourselves away in case we should get near to any of them returning to the fold. You will understand me when we have gone a little further. There is a wrinkle here that I do not wish to have them drop to."

Lorrimer made no answer. He was listening to the breathing of the man in front of him, and the footfalls which scarcely reached his ears. He could not help but hear; and Snow might understand without saying that his warning would be heeded.

The suspense did not last for long. When they had gone a dozen more paces the colonel halted, with a low breathed, "Stop!"

"In case you should ever come this way in anything of a hurry it may be as well that you should know what there is in the passage ahead of us. Stoop down carefully, and look. I can throw a light on it for an instant without much danger of being seen."

Then the outlaw carefully lit a match and held it downward.

The feeble light showed a yawning chasm stretching across the floor of the passage. The flame failed to reveal its breadth or depth, but Lorrimer could well understand that another step or two would have meant death to both of them.

"Humph! A pretty trap to catch intruders; but it seems to shut off our way as well. How do you cross it?"

"We will not cross it at all, though you and I will be the only ones who have come this far and failed to try. There is a bridge, but we will not go over it. At least, you will not. It may be as well for me to lay a little trail on the other side, so that they may cry off on the wrong scent in case any of the boys are of an inquiring frame of mind, and come this way to look after us. It seems that they have hardly got over the idea that you are a marshal or a detective. Step back two paces, and then I will help you over the rifle."

The young man did as he was requested, and he measured off his progress backward with an exactness which showed that he understood the dangers surrounding them, and was not at all anxious to meet death under such circumstances, careless as he had seemed in other moments of danger.

"Here is your bridge. I suspect that when you get the hang of the thing you will be more at home on it than I have ever been. Climb up to the top of the abutment and wait there till I come. It will all be plain sailing. When your hands strike a log, shift your grip and climb over."

The "bridge" was simply a thick rope, the end of which the colonel placed in Lorrimer's hand.

"And in case you should not come at all?" asked Lawrence.

"Then your best plan would be to slide down the rope, and take the back track. Tell the men to look for me in the Devil's Gap, and make the best terms for yourself that you can. There will be a vacancy that perhaps you could fill with some credit to the family, and profit to yourself."

"In case the emergency arises I will take the idea into consideration," was the quiet answer; and without further hesitation Lorrimer began the ascent, which was accomplished without delay or mischance.

Once over the top of the log he found himself on a shelf of rock sufficiently wide to make him feel at ease, since the wall at the further side precluded the possibility of his taking a tumble. When he had settled himself at his ease, and announced that all was right, the colonel began the ascent, and was soon by his side.

"Good enough, so far. The rope fits into a pocket on the wall when it is drawn up a little, and it would be hard for one who knew nothing about it to find it. From here the ledge goes on some distance, meeting so nearly a like ledge on the other side that there is no great difficulty in springing from the one to the other, though it is a little trying to the nerves when one thinks of what lies below. I will not put you to a useless test, however, as there will be enough work in the way of climbing to try both your nerves and your muscles."

The colonel was gone for some little time, and when he returned he came so silently that Lorrimer was not aware of his presence until he spoke.

"It is all right, I hope. No sign of any one beyond, and as I supposed it would be, the coast

is clear for the grand ascent. This time I had better go ahead, and I will run the risks and give you a little light on the subject when it comes to your turn to climb. Remain where you are until I hail you. Then slide along to your left until the wall stops you and I will see you through."

It required but a few moments for the colonel to get over the ascent of which he spoke, but to Lorrimer, sitting alone in the darkness, uncertain of what dangers might be around him, and sure only that a slip or a start would cause an ugly fall, if not death, they were moments of excitement and suspense.

"Be ready, now!" at length came the sharp whisper, and looking upward in anticipation there was a faint glimmer of light, followed by the halo-like glare of a dark-lantern, while the colonel continued:

"You will find something like steps in the wall, and when you have climbed a dozen of them you will be able to reach a rope. Keep a tight hold on that; and when you come to the end of the rock swing out, hand over hand. It will be only a few yards, and then I can reach you. I found this line of retreat, and I never wanted to make it too easy or the secret might have been discovered by others. Hurry up, and don't look downward. I will not have the light going for a second more than I can help."

"I see the way, and if you choose you can put out your lantern at once," was the quiet answer.

"I have the bearings, and know what I can do. Light or darkness it is all the same."

"As clear grit as any man ever showed," answered the colonel, at the same time extinguishing the lantern.

"For a woman it is something phenomenal, though education has something to do with it, I suppose. You put your hours in the gymnasium to some good purpose. Come on, then. The risk is yours, and if anything goes wrong, the sorrow will be mine. For the first time in my life I would have my regrets."

Lorrimer had nothing more to say. He had seen the little projections that were to serve as footholds, and though it looked like a perilous task, he believed that he could follow where the colonel led. Once with his hands on the rope, he was sure that his grip would not loosen until he had reached the point of safety.

The ascent was even more difficult than it had seemed, yet he made it without a slip or a pause. A dozen of these projections were counted off by Lorrimer before he held tightly with one hand and felt around for the rope with the other.

It was not so easy to find. The colonel had forgotten that he was the taller of the two, and that he had been making arrangements for himself alone when he laid out this roadway, the secret of which was known to no one else. Here and there the hand wandered in the darkness, searching for the rope, the exact location of which he had noted before he had essayed the path of danger. Had the colonel withdrawn it? The question came into Lorrimer's head just about the time that it seemed to him that a few more moments in his strained position would bring about a catastrophe. The fingers with which he was holding on ached and then began to grow numb, while the rock seemed to be slipping away from his grasp. He must either ask for help—a thing that he had seldom done, and which was shocking to his pride—or else make a desperate effort at the risk of the fall which failure would bring.

He chose the latter. Bringing the fingers of the free hand down to the side of those which had been holding on, he changed his grip, drew himself upward as far as his strength and reach would allow, and then made a clutch with the one hand, which loosened the fingers of the other, and he felt himself going over backward from the rock.

But at the same time his fingers tightened around the rope, which was further from the face of the wall than he had thought.

His grip tightened on the second. Holding tightly with whichever hand was on the cord, he edged his way along the narrowest of ledges, which he could scarcely feel beneath his feet. When that pathway ceased, he swung out on the rope as he had been advised, just as the colonel, who had been listening in the darkness until he began to fear that something had happened, flashed once more upon him the light of his lantern.

The action showed to Lorrimer his path; but it also showed him the danger below. He would have preferred to finish his journey in the darkness.

And it seemed to have worked other mischief, too. As unexpectedly as the light had come did it disappear—and none too soon. As the gloom closed over them, there were several flashes from below, in quick succession, and each one of them was followed by the ping and spat of a pistol-ball, which came very near to the man on the rope.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN UNEXPECTED WITNESS.

"CURSES on the spies, what evil luck brought them here!" gritted the colonel, as he reached

out a helping hand to Lorrimer, who fortunately was almost at the end of the passage.

"Crouch down behind me while I settle this matter. The fools! Of course they did not recognize you; but that does not help any. It will never do to let them go back--ah!"

The revolver in the hand of the colonel spoke twice, in quick succession. The men below had fired again, and by the flashes of their weapons Colonel Snow had marked them down. After his shots there was a brief silence.

"I must know more," whispered the colonel.

"Remain here until I come back. Here is the lantern. If anything happens to me show a light and it will be easy enough to pick your way over the rest of the road. Once out of this labyrinth you will have little trouble in reaching Oro. But I guess my time has not come yet, so don't fly off the handle until you are certain I am up the flume."

"Why not wait and see whether there will be any further attack? If they will let us alone all will be well; and if they will not we could hold this position against a hundred. I can feel a bowlder at my back that would be large enough to shelter both of us."

"Perhaps; but I am burning my bridges as I go along. If these fellows get away there will be trouble in the camp. They can point out the road we have taken, and that points as directly toward Oro as though it was a sign-post. No! Remain here, and I will see what has really happened to the fools. If not satisfactory I will see that something more thoroughly comprehensive occurs."

There was no time to argue further, since the colonel immediately moved away, adding as he went:

"Unless their luck saved them I think my shots reached them both. I had them fairly marked, and when my life or liberty is hanging on it I never miss."

Ten minutes of utter silence passed, and then a shoot of light came suddenly up from below, and with it the voice of the colonel:

"Rest easy. I will be with you in a minute more. Everything is satisfactorily arranged. There will be more disappearances than one to account for, and the secret of the more important will be safe. It maybe that it will never be needed, but I spent too much time over this way of retreat to care to give it away until it has served its purpose."

There was an air of exhilaration in his tones that told how well satisfied he was with the way things had gone. If Lorrimer had asked questions he would probably have revealed the fate of those below; but the young man was discreet in his day and generation, and had no desire to be possessed of an unpleasant secret, which might some day give him more than trouble. He was better satisfied to have the colonel bid him follow, which he did without delay or remark.

As they were past what he considered the turning point of the adventure, and were now in a passage known only to him, the outlaw chief had no longer much regard for caution. He spoke louder, and brought forth his lantern to throw a little light on the dark places, which it would take some time yet for them to leave.

Before they had gone far the rift widened into a cavern, through which, hugging the wall to the right, the colonel led the way.

"And here we are, on the Oro side of the mountain. Had we followed the route which we left at the gap we would have come out on the other side, and there would have been a journey for a day if not more to reach the town at the hour when I hope to get there. I hope to make our entrance there so certainly timed that there will be no difficulty in the most casual inquirer discovering the strength of the *alibi*. And now that the way to the air is not far off I want to caution you once more. The game that we will play will be one with some danger connected with it. These men of the West, as you have no doubt discovered, are gallant supporters of the female sex, as long as they are able to idealize them; but there are times when even sex is no protection. There must be no slips; and I am not sure but if we had the time I would insist on giving a day or so to rehearsal. You have agreed to be known henceforth, and until this quest has ended, as Maud Daniels. There must be no lapsing from the character into that of Lorrimer or you will run the risk of having us both hanged, if nothing worse. You have not done as you promised. You have been young Lorrimer, even with me. Drop it! I want to be sure of you even before I begin. You may have to run the gantlet of even sharper eyes than mine; and if they get any aid from their ears there is no telling what they might not be able to see! Remember. And if you forget, you will be apt to be brought up with a round turn."

"All right. I understand. You want the voice of Ilma Merton, the figure of a woman, and the name of Maud Daniels. I can fill the bill; and in the future you will not have occasion to reproach me. Only, waste no more time. There seems to be something of a journey before us, and the sooner it is over the better."

And the voice was so different that it satisfied even so critical a person as Colonel Snow. He had nothing further to say on the subject, for the present, at least. They were coming out into the starlight at last, though as yet they could not see more than a faint glow. There was a curtain of leaves between them and the outer world; and through this the colonel anxiously peered before making his way out. Now that they were, in the opinion of Lorrimer, almost if not quite out of danger, the caution of the outlaw was redoubled.

There was nothing about the spot to give Lorrimer any trouble. It was lonely and quiet. As far as could be seen in the dubious light, there was nothing to show that it had ever been visited by man, though the colonel stepped forward with the confidence of one well acquainted with the place.

There was no path, or suggestive trend of the ground, so that it was hardly by chance that he found his way so directly to a little cabin, which was almost completely hidden on all sides save one, and that looked upon a canyon which was of uncertain depth, and sufficiently precipitous sides to prevent approach from that direction.

The colonel looked around with some satisfaction, and then pointed to the door.

"This is the retreat which I had provided for a rainy day. There has been a little confidence bestowed, as you can imagine; but it was so gradually done I think I can be sure that no one living knows the exact location of the place. I have lived here for a week at a time, and had a privacy which a hermit might have envied. You will find your trunk here--or, rather, the better part of its contents. I fancied that you would have more use for it right here than elsewhere; and wild as the fancy was you can see how wise was the provision which I made. I will light a lamp, point out the conveniences of the lodge, and then leave you to the mysteries of your toilet."

"I can hardly expect to find many of the things which I need the most if it was your hand which did the selecting; but if there is a fair stock of feminine gew-gaws I suppose that I can make myself tolerably presentable, and when we get to a civilized country I can finish the work so that it will stand closer inspection. I have put myself in your hands because I believe that I can have little hope of finding out, unaided, the things I most desire to know. I am not satisfied with the plan so far as it has been divulged; but I am willing to give it a trial. If you deal fairly and honestly by me, as one Merton should by another, it will be well and good, whether the end is success or failure. If you attempt to betray me, beware! As sure as there is a heaven above us I will have the vengeance which a Merton who has been wronged has always taken. What that is you know full well."

"I know that you will not have occasion to regret having joined me in this business, provided you allow me to carry it through after my own fashion," answered the colonel in a much lower tone.

"There are two things we both have in view--wealth and vengeance. For my part, if there is any difficulty about obtaining them both I would prefer the first, yet if your choice runs the other way I will assure you that I will stop at nothing until it has been satisfied. You can trust me to the death."

"If it must be so that the division be made, the gold for you, the vengeance for both of us! When I find the place to strike, the blow will come, no matter on whom it falls. Take that as a warning if you need it, or an oath if you are worthy to hear it recorded."

"To me it sounds more like a threat," retorted the other, coolly.

"For the sake of the family I am putting myself into danger that should of itself be a guarantee of my good faith. It is too late now to draw back. As I told you, I have been burning my bridges behind me. If I hear more of this raving I will begin to believe that you are as crazy as the wildest. I would respect your condition, as well as your blood; but it will be unpleasant to be tied to a maniac, and be compelled to watch her vagaries. And then, in self-defense one sometimes hits harder than intended, even at a woman. Best contain yourself until you see where your trail is going to lead you."

"I trust you so far as I can see you. Your gang is not now at your back and I can speak more plainly than when I was their prisoner and yours. It is better that we should first understand each other, then we can go on with the work."

"Your explanations only make your threat the more apparent. By heavens! If it were not for the tie of family there would be war between us from this time on. And those with whom I fight are always crushed. Say no more, or I may forget."

"If my warning has been thrown away on you, then, forget as soon as you choose."

It looked as though the colonel was about to take Lorrimer at his word. He gave a step forward, and his hand dropped to his hip after the fashion of a desperate man in his wrath.

And Lorrimer stood on guard, with his hand

down by his side. It was possible that he could shoot as well as his companion.

But to the surprise of both, at the moment of the step, the hat of the colonel flew off, and there was the sound of a pistol-shot, coming from the other side of the canyon.

It was the second unexpected attack which had been made on them that night; and this time it was not so easy for the colonel to explain to himself what it meant, nor did he meet it after the same fashion as he had done the other. His hand dropped away from his pistol, and he sprung within the cabin, calling upon Lorrimer in a low tone to follow him.

CHAPTER XIX.

A BLOW FROM BEHIND.

THE surprise of the Gent from Jaybird was genuine. Of that there could be no doubt.

And the surprise of Dennis was evidently as great.

"Sure, an' it's not a fair deal thet ye hev bin giving me, lethin' on that ye didn't know the shpot, whin all the toime ye wor born an' raised on it. Phat wor the Alcazor to yez? It might be Oi could say something about that same meself."

"Excuse me, old man, but it was not that I had any doubts as to your trustworthiness that I never mentioned to you that I had been in this region before. I was one of the first raiders, and went over the ground before the Indian rush that cleaned us out, and made us forget that we had ever seen a sign of pay-dirt here. And till I clapped eyes on some old, familiar landmarks, I had no idea where I was drifting. I may be mistaken, too. If not, old Billy may not have been as big a fool as he looked, if he knows how to put this purchase to the best use. I think I see the beginning of the opening of a mystery; and you can bet largely that I will not give it up soon. It would be strange enough if it ran into the other matter I have on my mind. I must go down and look the land over if I can have the chance. And if I can't, it will be a pretty good sign that Billy knew just what it was he was going for when he put up all the coin he had corraled. As I may have a conversation with the old fellow that he would want more or less private, I guess it will be best for you to stay here till I join you again. Meantime, you can be keeping a little watch on what is going on around here, and if you see any suspicious characters in the bushes, let me know about them when I get back."

"Sure, an' av ye don't come back, at all at all? Phat would Oi be after tellin' ye thin? It's as well to let me know whoile ye hev the chance."

"In that case, Dennis, wait a reasonable time, and then administer on my effects after the usual style. You will find my extra cash in my black pants pocket, and my spare revolvers in the bottom of the gripsack. Good-by, and luck be with both of us."

"Sure, an' av the luck gives out what's to hinder av tournin' a jack from the bottom? Better pray for a big game, wid lashin's av money in it, an' then let foine playin' do the rist. Luck is a foine thing, but riddy fingers are better onny day."

"I don't know but what you are right," laughed Mr. Jackson, as he began the descent which led to the mouth of the shaft below.

During the brief conversation between the two the man whom Dennis had pointed out had in some way managed to disappear. Mr. Jackson had not thought it best to hail him from a distance for fear of alarming him; for Billy Binks was not considered to be very courageous, and the suggestion had been made that he bought the Dandy Belle because he wanted a mine which no one would care to jump.

But gone he was; though whether he had descended the shaft, or taken refuge in the neighboring mesquites, was more than Mr. Jackson was able to make out.

"He's like the Irishman's flea that I sometimes tease Dennis about. You put your finger on him and he is not there. Sorry; but I suppose he can be found; and if he once gets a view of my classic features he may recognize his only friend, and govern himself accordingly. I must have a talk with him before I leave, if it is only to give him a hint that the Dandy Belle may be an uncomfortable bit of property to take care of after all."

But whether or no Billy recognized his friend, or even saw him at all, he made no sign; and he had left no trace. When Mr. Jackson reached the shaft he found the bucket swinging half way down, and no hand at the windlass.

"Hillo, Billy!" he shouted, in a tone that was not too loud. If Binks had prudently retired he could not have gone very far, and there was no need to awaken the surrounding echoes. They might come to ears it was undesirable should hear.

"Don't be a fool, man. You ought to know that I am all right; and that I wouldn't have taken the trouble to come out here if I had not something to say that it is to your interest to hear. Show up, man. You are safe enough with me."

William did not answer. It was possible that

he did not hear; but more likely still that he did not care to meet his visitor; and though the Gent from Jaybird looked around keenly enough, there was nothing to show him to which point of the compass he had better turn to find the missing man.

"The confounded idiot!" he murmured, after a moment or two of vain effort to obtain a response.

"He won't answer; and if I swing down and leave him above he is just fool enough to take up the rope and leave me below to starve. I suppose I will have to risk that last, however, as I have no time to waste if I want to get back to Oro before dark. I will take a look at the mine, and run the chances of seeing him afterward."

The supposition was that Billy was working his claim alone. If so, and the old fellow had run away, there was not much danger of meeting any one; yet, for all that, it was not a very pleasant thing to descend that shaft unbidden and alone. Dennis would have been of some value just then, and Mr. Jackson half turned his face in the direction of the spot where he had left the little Irishman, while a call was on his lip.

He changed his mind, however, and quietly began to wind up the bucket.

The shaft was of no great depth, so that it did not take long to bring the box to the surface; or for Mr. Jackson to complete his few preparations to descend.

The rope was simply thrown over a wheel, and if Binks used it without assistance then it was not hard to guess how it operated. Mr. Jackson let the loose end dangle, took a tight grip on the rope just below the pulley, dropped his feet into the bucket, and slowly began the descent.

"Wonder where he keeps his candles, or torches," he thought as his feet rested once more on the solid ground.

"My little candles might see me out, but I would just as soon that he furnished the illumination. Filly! Hello, Billy! Show a glim here, will you? You ought to know me. I wanted to do you a good turn, and you wouldn't have it. If you listen to me now I may be able to do you a bigger one. I have no time for fooling, either."

Still no reply. And as the darkness a few feet from where he was standing was so complete that he would not be able to make progress, or move a step in safety, the Gent from Jaybird had recourse to his wax matches, after all, though he knew that unless he found something better his explorations would have to be of the briefest.

Luck was in his favor, however—or, perhaps, some remembrances aided him still more. He caught the general direction of the tunnel which led away from the shaft, and found in a few steps an opening in its side which looked upon a room-like excavation where the proprietor had stored his tools, and even slept upon occasion. Sure enough, a lantern was there, and upon testing it, Mr. Jackson learned that it was filled, and ready for use. To light it, then, with the remnant of his match, was his next care; and then he turned his steps back to the shaft, and followed it along for some distance with an assured pace.

Finally, however, he halted, and holding his light up over his shoulder, looked around after the manner of a man who is not altogether certain of his ground.

"It is the same place, sure enough," he muttered, "and yet there has been a change or two: which is natural enough, considering the different hands it has been in since then. Looks as though there was a chance for Billy, after all—unless the lower drift has been worked out, and covered up for good. When a lead drops once it is not such a steady thing always, even if you do find it again. Or has the old fellow hidden it up until he can find the chance to clean it out in what he considers safety? I reckon I can find out if I look sharp enough."

Unconsciously he was speaking aloud. If there was any one listening, his actions could be all the more easily understood on account of his words. Having examined the walls of the tunnel to assure himself of the location of the spot, he swept the lantern lower down, while his gaze was fixed on the floor.

"Ah, I think I have! I knew I could not be mistaken. If anything, it is only too plain, though, perhaps, that makes it all the safer. If Billy can handle that rock, I don't see any reason why I should not be able to raise it. Here goes."

Mr. Jackson placed his lantern upon the floor of the tunnel, and bent over a particular spot where it seemed to him that he could trace the outlines of a large, flat rock.

How heavy it might be was only a matter of guess-work, of course; and, after looking at it for several minutes, it began to seem as if it would remain that and nothing more. There was nothing but the smooth surface of the rock to attack, the slight crevice which outlined its shape offering no hold to the willing fingers of the Gent from Jaybird, nor was there a spot where a crowbar or a pick could be inserted sufficiently to obtain any purchase. If it was so that this rock closed an opening which led to a

shaft below, the work had been well done, and strictly resembled the natural thing.

"It is there, all the same," grumbled the searcher, shaking his head, and probing the crack with the blade of his knife.

"The only question is whether it is put there to raise at pleasure; or placed there to stay for all time, or to be lifted once for all. Don't seem as though it could have been fixed up this way in Billy's time; and it may be that the old fool has not found it after all. Wouldn't Abel Kain howl if he knew how often he had passed over the door that may lead to a fortune? If the old man had the sand to hold on to his bargain when they came for it there would be a heap of satisfaction in giving Kain a yard of straight goods. But I guess the secret belongs to Billy and he has the right to do what he wants with it. All the same I wish I had—"

What Mr. Jackson was about to wish remained a mystery for the rest of his lifetime, for at that moment there came an interruption to his soliloquy.

He had heard no sound to indicate that he was no longer alone, and now consciousness so suddenly faded away from him that he had not even time to understand that he had been struck down from behind by a blow from a club, which descended upon his head with crushing force, and stretched him apparently lifeless upon the floor.

CHAPTER XX.

WHY MR. JACKSON PULLED TRIGGER.

"WELL, if this don't beat cock-fighting!"

The speaker was Mr. Jackson, and though the words were feebly uttered there was no mistake about the genuineness of the laugh that followed, even though he suffered himself to drop languidly back upon the hard rock on which he was resting.

He had no idea as to the lapse of time, or even what had happened to him, when first his eyes opened; and he lay silent for a few minutes, staring blankly at his surroundings, which were not at all what they should have been. He was no longer in the tunnel of the old Alcazor; the lantern had disappeared, and the light of day was struggling down to him through an entirely different shaft.

How he had got there, and when, were at first mysteries which puzzled his bewildered brain. There was pain in the back of his head, however, which gave him an inkling of the facts in the case; and when he had placed his hand upon the lump which had raised there, and which was about the size of a hen's egg, he had a better understanding of the case, even if there was a shock to his self-esteem.

"Count a great big one on Mr. Jackson. There can be no question but what some one downed me with a club, and then carted me here—wherever I am. Who was that somebody? If it was Binks, he has more nerve than he ever got credit for; and I ought to shake and congratulate when I get the chance. But if it was not Billy, then I am afraid that I came mighty near giving things away. Anyhow, they wanted to get rid of me; and if they meant it to be for good, they didn't make such a bad stagger at it. To be sure, if they had just dumped me in here there would not have been a bone left unbroken, so that it looks as though I was only lowered here to get me out of the way. But, all the same, where am I and how am I to get out? If I was one of the despairing kind, I would say that they had better have broken my neck and been done with it, since they have left me here to starve. As it is, I don't think I shall say die till I have got safely over the range, and seen the walls of the other country. It looks like a tight box, but when I rest my bones a little more, I think I will rise to the emergency, even if I have to fly."

The man from Jaybird had covered the ground pretty well in his cogitations; and now that his strength had returned, he thought that it was time to act. By getting away at once, he might miss discovering who it was that had placed him there, and with what intentions; but from the looks of the sunlight above, he suspected that more time had already elapsed than he could conveniently spare, and that in any event he would have a night tramp to reach Oro. Besides, he was sure that in a very short time he would be inordinately hungry. He was already beginning to feel the demands of appetite.

After a few more minutes spent in investigation it began to look more than ever that fly it would have to be if he intended to get out of the trap unaided. The knife which he had held in his hand at the time he received the blow from behind was gone, so that there was no way of cutting a stairway up in the rock—even if he had time for the operation. The shaft was entirely too wide to climb it after the fashion of a chimney sweep; and there would be no use in attempting to attract the attention of any one to the spot. The only person who would be likely to come would be the very man who placed him there. After a very thorough examination of matters the only consolation he found was that his revolvers were safe in the belt around his waist. He might yet make his teeth meet if he had visitors such as he more than half expected.

"Reckon it is no use to rush the mourners, after all," he said at length, settling himself down with his back against the wall.

"There seems to be but one particle of hope left in the box, and that takes the shape of Dennis. He may go on to town to-night; but if I don't turn up he will not rest till he knows what has become of his pard. And to get at the bottom of things when he once sets his head I don't know that there is a better man than that same little Irishman."

"Oh, Dennis, dear, come back to me. I count the hours away from thee."

So sung Mr. Jackson in a rather lugubrious tone, and then, with his revolvers clasped in his hands, which were resting between his knees, he gazed upward. Perhaps he was in hopeless reverie; and perhaps he imagined that he heard a faint sound borne from the outer world.

If the latter he was not disappointed.

With a swish and a twirl something came dropping down the shaft, narrowly escaping hitting him on the head, and then there was a silence which Mr. Jackson did not at once deem it expedient to break. A rope stretched down from above, and if he kept quiet it was possible that some one would attempt to descend.

No one appeared, and after a little he gave a gentle tug at the end which rested at his side.

Evidently the cord was fastened at the upper end. It had been thrown in for a purpose; but had it been done by a friend or an enemy? If by a friend, why had he kept himself so persistently in the background; if by an enemy what was the scheme that was behind? Perhaps to shoot him as he ascended.

"Have to run the risk," sighed Mr. Jackson, as he took hold of the rope and began the ascent.

"It will be extremely unhealthy for the gentleman I happen to see in the background. After such an experience one, hardly cares to wait for explanations. The quickest shot takes the cake—and that will be your humble servant."

Fortunately for some one the skill of the Gent from Jaybird at snap-shot shooting was not put to the test. He reached the outer world without let or hindrance, and found himself utterly alone, in a spot with which he was entirely unfamiliar, and which might be miles away from the Alcazor for all he knew. Indeed, from the conformation of the hills around him he suspected that his unconsciousness had lasted much longer than he had hitherto thought. The sun was getting low down in the west, and darkness would be on him long enough before he could get to Oro, or even to the spot where he believed he would find a trail which led to the city. It was only guess-work; but he thought that he recognized a tall spire of mountain in the distance, though he did not remember ever to have seen it before from this side.

This much he took in while glancing around in search of the individual who had dropped him the rope.

It was true that the rope might have been coiled up somewhere at the top of the shaft, and been dislodged by some little chance, hardly to be explained. Lucky accidents will occasionally happen, though Mr. Jackson was not given to relying on them when in trouble. He preferred to think there was a man in the case, even though he could find no trace of him.

The ground in the immediate vicinity of the mouth of the shaft was such that a foot would not be apt to leave a print, and during the time he was ascending the shaft it would not have been at all difficult for an average runner to get into concealment. The Gent from Jaybird shrugged his shoulders, turned his face in the direction of the pinnacle he had decided was a landmark which might guide him out of this wilderness, and settled himself doggedly to the tramp before him.

As he went along he had time to revolve in his mind what had happened. The more he thought over it the more he was convinced that there was another hand besides that of Billy Binks in the game; though it was possible that his rescue was due to the latter. It was just like the old fellow to toss him a rope and then run for dear life.

"Anyhow, the old man is in danger, and though he may know it well enough I will give him a warning when I get the chance; and pump him well besides, to see if he knows what sort of a claim he has bought into. If I could have got the first chance at the thing I don't know but what I would have been glad enough to have taken it; but now that he is in it I will play him fair; and if it was really he who tossed me the rope I'll make it more than even before we get through with the affairs of the Alcazor. He must have seen the party that took me in; and if I can once find that out I will have a pretty fair idea of how the game stands, and what will be likely to be the next move on the board."

So interested was he in these speculations that though he kept a sharp eye on the course he desired to go he was passing over the ground without taking much note of time and distance. The shades of night were falling around him,

and he had not yet reached the pinnacle he was aiming for, though he had kept his face steadily toward it. Quite unexpectedly he was halted by a canyon, the existence of which he had not suspected until he stood upon its brink.

The mountain gash lay right across his path, and though the shadows were rapidly deepening he could distinguish the other bank, and something of the nature of the ground which lay beyond it. Once across and a few miles would probably take him to the line at which he was aiming; but the crossing was a puzzle which he could not at once solve. The distance across was not great, but it might as well have been a hundred miles so far as direct progress was concerned, and he was just making up his mind that his only plan would be to turn along the bank, following the rise in the land until the head of the canyon was reached, when he heard voices upon the opposite side.

Instantly he was on the alert. It might mean that the men who had placed him in the old shaft were near; or it might be that help was close at hand. In either case he preferred to keep silent until he learned what would be the best course for him to pursue.

At first the voices came to him in a murmur, out of which he could make nothing intelligible. Then it seemed that he could recognize the tones of one of the speakers without being able to place him.

"It can't be—and yet, I swear, I believe it is. Colonel Snow, for a dollar! Now then, who is it with him, pard or victim? Pity it is that I can't reach him. Unless he has his gang at his back I would be apt to ask him some questions; and get an answer, too. Ah!"

He listened more closely than ever. The party beyond was evidently drawing nearer, though as yet concealed from his view. He could distinguish a word here and there out of what was being said; and he listened with more breathless eagerness than ever, since the voice of the second speaker was not altogether unfamiliar.

"If my warning has been thrown away on you, then, forget as soon as you choose."

That was what Ilma Merton was saying, or he was more wildly mistaken than he had ever before been in his life; and at the same time he saw the colonel step into view, his hand dropping toward his hip as though to draw the revolver which swung there.

At sight of that Mr. Jackson waited no longer, but threw up his own weapon and pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE STRANGERS AT ORO.

THE light was uncertain, the distance a long one for accurate shooting, and Mr. Jackson had not lingered on his aim. As the reader already knows, it was a very close thing of it; but the colonel escaped unharmed, and before the little puff of smoke hanging over the canyon had drifted away he had vanished.

Just where he went to the man from Jaybird could not tell; but he knew that for once he had missed his mark. What made it more provoking was the fact that he did not get a glimpse of the other speaker at all. He crouched down on the brink of the canyon, and peered into the shadows, all the time expecting there would be an answering shot, which would give him a chance to send in the bullet he was afraid to let fly at random. If Ilma was there—as he felt she must be—it would never do to risk a chance shot; and, indeed, it was perhaps the sudden thought that she might be endangered which saved the colonel. A single tremor of the wrist, made at the exact moment when steadiness is most needed, can make a bullet fly very wild.

But the outlaw had no idea of accepting the challenge; and the Gent from Jaybird waited in vain for any further sign from beyond. The man had vanished; and immediate pursuit was out of the question.

Once satisfied that there was nothing further to be gained by waiting, Mr. Jackson moved cautiously away. There was only one thing to do, and that was to get on the other side of the canyon as soon as possible. Once there and he thought it would be strange if he could not strike the trail of the two.

"And once on it, you can bet your bottom dollar I don't leave it until I know where it leads to. The young lady is alive; and so long as she is above ground I don't give up the chase."

Mr. Jackson spoke very confidently to himself, as he hurried along toward what he thought was the head of the canyon, but he reckoned without the host. He did at length come to a place where, with some trouble and danger, it could be crossed; but once on the other side of the gulf he found that he was no better off than before, since he struck another fissure, as difficult as the first. For several hours he wandered around before he could reach the spot where he had seen the outlaw, and by that time the latter had disappeared more completely than Mr. Jackson would have thought possible. He found the cabin, indeed, with its few, simple belongings, but there were no traces of Ilma Merton, nor yet of the colonel. Surely, this little cot

in the hill had never been constructed for a prison; and there was a certain lonesomeness about it which made it seem impossible that it had been inhabited for any length of time.

In spite of all that he had but lately vowed Mr. Jackson gave it up—for the present, at least.

"No use to camp on the war-path to-night. Am short of ammunition, and as hungry as a bear. I ought to be able to reach Oro by midnight; and if I do I can get back here by daylight. That will be plenty time enough for business. The moon hardly throws light enough to trail a grizzly by over such ground as this, and to go floundering around would only scare the game away. Business is opening out so briskly that there is no use to fly off the handle. I must take a quiet think over things: for somehow I begin to believe that all these trails I want to follow will run into each other. And I may have more trouble about finding my way out than I have been thinking. If I strike a few more of these gulches there will be more work than fun in the prospect."

It was the first sign that the Gent from Jaybird could possibly lose confidence in himself, and it turned out that there was a solid foundation for the suggestion. Had it been daylight he might have found less trouble; but, accustomed as he was to night work, the shadows proved more or less deceiving, and it was by no means easy to hold his course. The pinnacle was not always in sight, and more than once he found he had lost his bearings altogether, and it was more chance than anything else that he so quickly found them again.

But pluck and perseverance will win sooner or later, and when at length Mr. Jackson found himself on the trail for which he had been searching, the night was far advanced, but the rest was easy. Oro was in the distance, and he lost no time in getting there. He climbed into his room without stopping to ask any questions, and slept the sleep of the well-tired.

"Shure, an' it's shlapin' ye are, as usual," was the salutation he heard on opening his eyes.

"An' me a-lyin' awake all the long noight, waitin' to hear the news from down below. Av yez hed nothin' to tell me ye moight have told me, an' savel me a worl'd av scospinse. The next time Oi'll go down an' say phwat wor the matther, orders or no orders. Oi waited till me back wor about bruk wid the toothache an' whin Oi saw niver a soign ave ye, an' the noight comin' on, Oi did az ye towld me an' kim back to Oro. But it worwid a hape av tribulations in me sowl; an' av you wor not here in the mornin' it wor a s'arch for yez Oi wor bound to make, av Oi had to blow the owld moine up from top to botthom, an' murther aven owld Bill himsilf. Explain, will ye? An' don't kape me waitin'. There must hev been lashin's av intherist in that interview, or ilse ye slid out by the back door, an' lift me there on a fool's watch. Be honest; till the truth; an' Oi swear Oi won't hurt ye."

In spite of the innuendo in his words there was no mistaking the real affection of the little Irishman. Without a doubt he had been troubled by the absence of Mr. Jackson; and nothing but his habit of strict obedience to orders had drawn him away from the Dandy Belle without first learning what was meant by the protracted absence of his chief.

"There is a good deal to explain, Dennis; but unfortunately I am not the individual who is in condition to do the explaining. Do you mean to say that you sat there keeping a watch on the top of that hole in the ground until the sun set without getting any idea of what had become of me?"

"Thure for you. Oi saw ye begin to discind; an' after that it wor all a blank. You wint in, an' never came out. That wor all I knew about it."

"Then you must have hit it closer than you knew when you talked about my having got out by the back door. There must be some other method of reaching the level below. You are not exactly blind, and as I came out in less than an hour after I went in, it must have been by a different route. What it was I will have to find out before I am many days older. Meantime, I suppose I may as well begin at the beginning, and give you the history of my adventures. And it will save a heap of time if you ask no questions until I am done."

Without reserve Mr. Jackson recounted his adventures, from the time he began the descent of the shaft, running over them rapidly, but sparing himself not at all. It was something of a blow to his pride to have to own that he had been captured and carried away without knowing how or by whom it was done; and that he had probably been rescued in the same inexplicable way. He had seen no one, heard no one, and had to do a good deal of guessing to make out a plausible story, even to Dennis.

The latter had lighted a short clay pipe when Mr. Jackson began to talk; and as far as the expression of his face went his principal anxiety and interest was to keep it alight. Match after match he struck in silence, holding them over the bowl with all the care he would have exercised in a gale of wind; and save for a twinkle now and then in his eye it could not have been

told that he was listening to Mr. Jackson at all. Not a word did he utter until he heard of the strange appearance of Colonel Snow and his companion. Then he gave an exclamation of surprise, which seemed forced out of him in spite of himself.

"Howly Moses! Sure, an' the roight way to say onny one is not to look at him, at all, at all. Oi'll not forgit it, d'yez moinde, now?"

"True enough, Dennis. For about the first time in a month I was not looking for the young lady, or thinking of her, either. And that was the supreme moment she chose to appear. Or, if she did not appear she at least made her presence audible. I have not heard that voice so often but it is not one that I will be likely to forget. But when I think of all the time I have lost trying to get on the track of that same Colonel Snow it makes me sick. A month lost; and she has been his prisoner all that time. I never was cut out for a detective."

"Sure, an' a detective would not have found him at all—an' mebbe he would not have lost him, ayther. Loike ez not it's roight that ye are."

"And how did you know that I lost him?" asked Mr. Jackson, eying his companion with a trifle of suspicion. He had not reached that part of the story, and it was hardly fair to anticipate it in that manner.

"Sure, an' if ye had him yit that would have been the foorst thing ye would have towld me long ago, to get up an' watch him whoile ye shlept. Go on wid the shstory, an' Oi'll say no more till ye are done."

"There is not very much more to tell. When I found I had missed him on the snapshot I tried to get on his trail, but it took so long to reach the other side of the canyon that he had plenty of time to slide out in some unknown direction, and pull his tracks up after him. I have a starting place at last, however; and this time I think I will be able to satisfy myself as to where Miss Merton went, even if I can do nothing more. You have been good as a little angel about asking questions, but I know that you are boiling over with them, and it is no more than right that you should have your innings. Fire away, now. Ask all you have a mind to, and when I get back from the breakfast table, where I am going before I am another minute older, I will answer as many of them as I can guess at."

Dennis pulled rather a long face at being left alone, for he had as much curiosity as was allowed by law, and there were a number of points he had thought needed further explanation. There was no use, however, in offering any objection to the movement of his chief, and he was forced to be content with finishing his pipe alone and in silence.

Mr. Jackson made a meal that lasted rather longer than usual. He had skipped a couple and so had to make up for lost time. As he was also deep in thought he hardly noticed the lapse of time and the quantity that he devoured. Without being ravenous his carrying capacity had been so largely increased that nature gave him no hint to stop, and it looked as though he might go on eating indefinitely.

Fortunately for Japhet Gigson, who otherwise might either have had to offend a generally profitable boarder, or else go into temporary bankruptcy, there was an interruption which recalled Mr. Jackson to himself and the outer world. Somewhat to his surprise, and more to his interest, two strangers entered the dining-room, and under the escort of the proprietor himself, who had just returned, took their places at the further end of the long table.

The elder of the two was a fine-looking, elderly man, dressed after the fashion of a prosperous, and possibly retired, business man of the East; while the other was a young lady, fine as to form, irreproachably clad, and with a face full of a dark though rather masculine beauty.

CHAPTER XXII.

WHERE IS COOL CHARLIE?

How these two strangers came to be there, who they were, and what they wanted, were questions that at once presented themselves to Mr. Jackson. He had already enough marked out to occupy his attention for some time, but here was a new mystery. People like these did not visit Oro without some special reason, and from their appearance he judged on the spot that it was an interesting one. Moreover, it seemed to him that there was a suggestion of something familiar about the two, and he could not help but wonder whether he had ever met them; and if so, under what circumstances. Certainly he would never have forgotten the lady if she had ever been an acquaintance, though he might have met the gentleman in a casual sort of way and forgotten all about his appearance an hour or two later.

"Of course they have a mission of some kind," he thought to himself, as he gave another, and what he intended should be a careless glance in their direction.

"It is none of my business; but I suppose, with my usual freshness, I will never rest until

I know all about it. I am not particularly susceptible—especially since I have seen Ilma—but when lovely woman appears to need a friend or a backer, Mr. Jackson always manages somehow to count himself in. I suppose the sex have got into a habit of depending on him. If they have they are seldom disappointed. Let's test the matter. I won't look that way again, and if they want to they can go their own way with all the rejoicing they can muster. And yet I will stake three to one that before twenty-four hours there will be a confidential interview, and she will be engaging me to fight under her banner. It has only been the dearth of pretty women in Oro that has kept me out of business so far. That affair of Miss Minnie's don't count, or else it is not yet finished. And, by the way, it looks as though she had more interest in the strangers than I have. She is eying them closely enough over that coffee. Yet they can't seem to recognize her. Perhaps I shall have to cultivate the waitress even yet."

In this sort of way the thoughts of the gentleman from Jaybird were running along as he finished his breakfast after a more leisurely fashion. He was taking in everything, unconcerned as he seemed, and made no mistake when he thought that Miss Minnie—by no other name was that young lady known among those who had occasion to speak to, or of, her—was interested in the new-comers rather more than she would have been were they simply strangers.

At first sight she had shrunk back barely a trifle, but the movement was enough to be perceptible to the keen eyes that happened to be on her. After that Mr. Jackson could see easily enough that she was watching with a puzzled interest.

Once, the gaze of the strange young lady was turned full upon her, resting there for some seconds in a calm, though possibly an inquiring sort of way; but there was no recognition in it; and when she turned again to the elderly gentleman it was with a remark which evidently had nothing to do with the fair Ilma of the Golden Goat, who had just filled her cup with the decoction which was passing current as coffee.

When, at length, Mr. Jackson could no longer stay at the table without trifling he went out to look up Gigson. He did not intend to make any inquiries, but he was pretty sure that the landlord would give some information of his own accord. He had forgotten all about Dennis, whom he had left in his room to await his return; and if he had thought of him he would simply have said that Dennis might continue to wait.

He found Gigson without any trouble; but at the same time he found Abel Kain, who was in conversation with the landlord. That made a difference in his plans, and he would have passed on without speaking had not Japhet called to him, and held out his hand while finishing the sentence he was uttering.

"Just a minute, Mr. Jackson. Mr. Kain was speaking of a couple of guests whom you may have noticed at the table. It seems that he was expecting them. He wants you to meet them, if you have nothing more important on your hands."

"Most happy, I am sure," murmured the gent, at the same time nodding to Kain.

"I will be around in a few moments if there is any hurry; or you can fix any hour this morning that you think will be agreeable. That is the advantage of being a gentleman of leisure. He can suit the convenience of other people, and has none of his own to consult."

"Oh, half an hour from now will do. I am not sure that you will take altogether kindly to Mr. Daniels; but if you would I assure that you are exactly the person he would most like to see. He is a stranger from the East, and he and his niece are in quest of a miner who once was located somewhere in this section—a man by the name of Daniels. It was so long ago that everybody seems to have forgotten about him, if they ever heard of him. A brother of his, you understand, who left what he thought was a fortune to his daughter, but the fortune and Mr. Daniels alike seem to have evaporated. Did you ever hear the name?"

Abel Kain spoke after the manner of a confidential friend rather than as a man with whom Mr. Jackson had at one time almost crossed swords, until he came to the question. That he shot at him as though he thought it was likely to prove an eye-opener.

Mr. Jackson showed no signs of confusion, but repeated the name over while he turned away his head in thought.

"Daniels? Daniels? Let me see. 'Old Dan Daniels!' Shouldn't wonder if that was the name; though I don't remember any one who looked as though he ought to be the father of the young lady I met in the dining-room. Yes. It seems to me that there was such a fellow, though he dropped out of sight years ago. I'll think the matter over, though I doubt if I will have anything for them worth the telling."

And as he went back to his room, and the almost forgotten Dennis, he was muttering to himself:

"Another Richmond in the field. I don't

know that my duty to Billy Binks requires me to keep my mouth shut about the affairs of the Alcazor, but I rather suspect that I shall until I see where this is all going to lead to. Can Kain know the facts in the case. If he don't, he will stare when he finds them out after due investigation—as of course he will."

"Sure, an' it's your own toime that ye have been afther takin', an' it's moighty glad Oi am that Oi don't board at the Goat," was the salutation of the Irishman, as he entered the room.

"Av ye lift onnything on the table it must have been the bones. In the hour ye wor gone, ye moight have ate an illephant. Av ye want to visit the Alcazor, or look around for Colonel Snow an' the young leddy, it will be late in the day when ye make your start."

"Truth, every word truth; and so, Dennis, I think I won't go at all. I always reserve the right to change my mind until I have given my word to some one besides myself. I have been looking the matter over, and have come to the conclusion that the colonel is too sharp to leave much of a trail. I would be just wasting my time out there among the rocks. It looks like a sudden conversion; but actually, I shall remain in Oro, and see if luck don't bring me what judgment so far has failed to do. There is another claimant for the Alcazor on hand—two of them perhaps—and they want an interview. I am going to give it to them, and by the time that is over there will be no opportunity left to tramp around the mountains to any great extent before nightfall. When we were out there, looking down at the dump, you suggested that you could give me a pointer or two on the subject of the Alcazor. I asked no further questions then, because I didn't want my knowledge mixed up with what you didn't know. Things are different now, and if you have anything to say, fire ahead. I can listen till Abel Kain calls me to the interview."

"Abel Kain! Sure, an' you wouldn't be afther havin' onny dealin's wid that same thafe av the world. A bad mon he is to fool wid, an' they say he is joost watchin' for the chance to get ye down."

"Can't help it, Dennis, dear. That is the way the cards are running now, and I will have to play my hand as it comes, or jump the game altogether."

"It's you an' him for it, then, an' Oi have nothin' more to say. Perhaps Oi had better kape me knowledge to meself, an' go on an' look for the young leddy. Sure, Oi am not the worst lookin' young mon in the world."

"The very thing I was going to propose. If you will take that part of the job off my hands, I will feel less as though I was throwing away a chance. And if you fail to strike any trail, as I more than half think you will, you can turn your attention to the Alcazor; and, by the way, you had better bite that name off short before you speak it aloud to the general public. It may be that the true clew is to be found by spotting the man, or men, with eyes on the mine. And that will leave me free to turn my attention to Ramah and the new arrivals. Oh, we will have more than our hands full, unless all the trails run in together at the wind-up."

"Yer' moighty aisy to please, that's one good thing about ye; an' Oi beg yer pardon for spakin' a bit cross-grained. Av ye have toime to hear phat Oi can tell ye av the mine, Oi will give it to ye straight as a string."

"Thanks; but I think I can hear the step of Kain in the hall, and I guess as I have done without it so long it will keep till we have an evening to ourselves. Only, believe that it has all been sober truth I have been telling you, and that I never was further from giving up the search for the missing Ilma than I am now. If I seem to go slow, it is because I intend to go sure, and because I think I am following the best course to insure success. That is all I can tell you now, for here is Mr. Kain."

As he ceased speaking there was a knock at the door. Mr. Kain was ready to conduct the Gent from Jaybird into the presence of the strangers, and he did so without delay.

Mr. Daniels rose from his seat and greeted his visitor with some show of cordiality.

"Glad to see you, sir; glad to see you. Mr. Kain, with whom I have been in correspondence for some time, has suggested that you are the very man I want to help me in my work. As a stranger to the ways of the West I would not make much progress by myself; and I begin to think that it will take the most of my time to look after my niece. She is deeply interested in our search, and is rash to boot. I am afraid that she will draw us into some trouble yet. Are you at liberty, so that you can give us a few days of your time? Of course, any compensation you might expect will be cheerfully given."

"As there is a lady in the case, of course my answer is yes. If I can help you in anything, I am at your service."

The stranger was just opening his mouth to return his thanks, when a voice directly behind Mr. Jackson took up the conversation. The young lady of the breakfast table had entered the room, and had probably heard only a few words of what had been said.

"Can you tell me, sir, where I can find a man once known as Cool Charlie?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

MAUD DANIELS LAYS DOWN HER PLATFORM.

"MR. JACKSON was conscious that the eyes of the so-called Mr. Daniels were on him, and that any change of countenance would be noted.

He cared little for that, because he was already on his guard, and had confidence enough in his nerves to believe that he would give no sign, no matter what was said or done. But, should he affirm or deny?"

A couple of nights before he had been frank enough with Lorrimer, owing to the fact that he had once been called by that name. If the question had come at him less like a test, and more like an honest effort for information, he might have been just as free in confessing himself to be the man.

Without any show of surprise, he turned slowly around, and as he faced the lady, made a low bow.

"If I understood your question aright—and it seemed so very plain that I could hardly have made a mistake—I am afraid that at present I must confess my inability to answer it. Even if I could, I think I would prefer a trifle of information as to why he was wanted. Out here it is rather a serious matter to assist in hunting up a missing man until you are certain that there is not to be a hemp sociable at the end of the quest. Who was Cool Charlie; and what has he been doing?"

While he spoke Mr. Jackson was looking earnestly, though respectfully, at the young lady who had addressed him, and thinking to himself:

"Cool Charlie seems to be in demand just now. After what Ramah said it may as well remain a mystery what has become of him; and anxious inquirers can look at the facts that seem to point to his death and burial several years ago. But if I am not away off there is some connection between this pair and Ilma Merton. The lady looks enough like her to be her cousin, though I might not have noticed it if it had not been for what the fortune-teller told me. There is a trick of the eye, and a cast of the features that I knew were familiar, and I think I can recognize them now. Sure as you live, the plot thickens."

Before the young lady could respond, her companion interrupted:

"You are too impulsive, Maud. A question like that, as Mr. Jackson very properly observes, should be supported by at least a brief resume of the facts in the case before an answer can be expected. Overlook the abruptness, if you please—you will understand the mental pressure which has forced it from my niece when you have heard the history of her experiences while engaged in this quest. First, allow me to make you acquainted. Mr. Jackson, my niece, Maud, in search of her father. Or, if that quest be helpless, which we begin to fear, then, of the causes which led to his death, and the assets which we have reason to believe he left behind."

Mr. Jackson bowed after his grandest fashion.

"If I can be of any service the young lady can command me. Of this I have already assured you. Was this Cool Charlie of whom she has just spoken supposed to be her father?"

"Not at all! Not at all!" exclaimed the colonel, with considerable vehemence.

"As we have heard of him he was a half sport, half mining expert, with whom my brother had dealings, and who was the last man known, if rumor be true, to have met him alive. If he could be found he might throw some light upon the disappearance, which was so complete that it seemed to be only by a mere chance that we heard of him, after this lapse of time, as having once flourished in the region where Oro is now located. We come to you, not because we have reason to believe that you know anything about the facts in the case; but because, as strangers to the ways of the West, we cannot prosecute our search alone; and you have been spoken of as a competent man, who would be apt to take an interest in the case were the facts once known to you."

"Oh, I understand all that. The boys think I am a modernized edition Don Quixote—and they may not be so far wrong. Just at present, time hangs a little heavily on my hands, since I am a gentleman of leisure. I suppose that I can find Dan Daniels if any one can, and I have no objection to make the effort. It is rather late in the day to be hunting him up, but if we can only get a little clew as to which way, and why, he went, the rest will follow in the course of time."

"You speak confidently," said the young lady, taking part, once more, in the conversation.

"Do you mean that you might find him living?"

"Certainly. I make it a rule to never believe that any one is dead unless I sat on the inquest. Out here men come, and men go, and there is little question about them, if they have lived square lives while they were in sight, until the sorrowing relatives begin to arrive. If I am going into the thing with you it may be as well to let me know the particulars that you have spoken of. After that I will give you my opin-

ion as to what there is in sight, and you can be guided by it or not, just as you please.

"True, true! Sit down and listen. It will not take long to tell you all that is necessary for you to know. If there is anything which may need explanation you are free to ask all the questions you choose and we will answer them as we can."

It is hardly worth while to relate in detail the conversation which followed, since the substance of it has already been given. The name of Merton was kept out of it; but otherwise the account was what came to the surface in the talk between the colonel and Lawrence Lorrimer. At the close Mr. Jackson was supposed to have a pretty fair idea of the family history, and the reasons why the search for the missing Daniel Daniels had only begun at this late day. To wind up, the colonel handed to the sport a package of letters, and other documents, all of them signed in a fair hand, "Daniel Daniels."

"It is just as well for you to understand that we are prepared to show who we are, and what are our rights in the case. As a business man I understand the utility of carrying on the investigation upon business principles. As you would not be apt to have much sentiment in the matter I would like to place our relations on a business footing. Whatever your time may be worth will be assured to you, and a certain percentage, after deducting the necessary expenses."

"Business is business, and I have no objection to being one of its prophets," laughed Mr. Jackson. "There is just one question which I would ask: What financial interest has Abel Kain in the finding of the old gentleman and his fortune? He has the reputation of never accumulating more than he can get his hands on; and it may be that there will be nothing left for the rest of us."

"I think you need have no fears of that gentleman trying to overreach us. I had some correspondence with him as a representative man of Oro; but he has not the time to give to us, and recommended you as the proper man to manage the actual work. Personally, I know nothing about him, save that he seems to be of marked enterprise and intelligence. He has promised to favor me with his advice at any time I may call upon him, but there his interest stops."

"And there mine will begin. All right. The first thing to do will be to look up the old settlers, and the old records. That will take a day or so, if we have any good luck. After that we will be able better to formulate the plan of the campaign, if one is needed. I suppose you wish the investigations to be made quietly."

"Certainly. I do not imagine we can be here without exciting some interest, but there is no use to proclaim our mission from the house-tops. If we get any voluntary information we can accept it for what it is worth, and may find a pointer in it. Of course, if there is any investigation to be done in the surrounding country, I will be with you in it. Maud is anxious to take part in it, also; but I think I can convince her that her best plan will be to confine herself as much as possible to the hotel, in our absence, and at no time go much beyond the limits of the place, at least until we have met with some success in the quest. From what I have lately heard of the region, I would be better satisfied if she was safely back at home. It may be we shall find the mine in possession of some one else who will be disposed to fight us tooth and nail."

"And you expect to fight back again?"

"That will depend, somewhat. So far as the mine goes, the title to it may have lapsed. If we have no rights in it, of course there is nothing to do but to gracefully submit, though it would seem like a hard case. But for any of the extracted wealth which my brother may have left behind, if we can once locate it, you may be sure we will support our claim vigorously enough."

"All right, again. You want the right on your side, and then you mean to fight to the bitter end. I understand better your idea in getting me into the affair. Well, as a general I hope I will prove a success. I do not think Miss Daniels will be in any particular danger, yet your notion is a good one. Always best to be on the safe side where a lady is concerned. I should infer that she has courage to face any dangers she may meet; but there are times when discretion is a heap sight better. And, exploring the mountains is not the sort of work for a lady, either. She could give little assistance, and might be in the way. If we keep her posted that ought to be sufficient for the present."

Miss Daniels smiled significantly. She appreciated the flattery, and intended to have her own way, all the same. It was not a very mirthful smile, to be sure, but it was the first relief Mr. Jackson had seen, to the set resolve which had been from the outset of the interview the only expression of her face. It made her look all the more like some one he had seen, and the Gent from Jaybird was now certain that there was something behind this quest which was worth the finding out. What relation there was between the pair and Ilma Merton, and what reason they had to be on the trail of Cool Charlie, were things he intended to know

before he made many confidences as to his own past life.

It seemed almost an echo of his thoughts. Suddenly the lady looked up at him once more.

"Make no mistake. It is true we do not refuse to profit by the labors of my father, in case it can be done; but were it only a question of gold be sure I never would have been seen here. We have reason to believe that he was murdered. It is to make sure; and if it be proved, then we must hunt down the assassin. When found he dies—if not by the hand of the law then by mine! It may be that we are trusting too much to a stranger, but, beware how you trifle with us! The man who permits the murderer to escape will be held as guilty as he. If we cannot trust you, better for us, and far, far better for you, that we are told in time. If you go further with us in this thing it is at your own risk."

"All right, miss. You will find me square as a die as long as I receive that kind of treatment. And when any one goes back on Mr. Jackson of Jaybird, there is music in the air."

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN UNEXPECTED WARNING.

MR. DANIELS seemed shocked at the outburst of his niece, and not at all offended by the response of Mr. Jackson. As though he feared that prolonging the interview might lead to some unpleasantness, he found an excuse to lead the Gent from Jaybird away, choking off the somewhat angry retort which was on the lips of his companion.

"All right, Maud, all right! I have no doubt the gentleman understands the situation thoroughly, and it is useless to waste any further time. I want him to make me acquainted with the town this morning; and we will look over the ground together and decide on the minutiae of the campaign later on. Amuse yourself as best you can. I think you will find a book or two which you have not yet exhausted. I will be back in a few hours; and then be better able to take you out to view the place. It will be better for you to remain here. You need rest after your journey; and I must say that you are not altogether yourself. Come, Mr. Jackson! We will have quite a tour to make before dinner, and with none too much time at our disposal."

Considerable interest was aroused at Oro at sight of the pair on the street; and various were the conjectures. Mr. Jackson himself had been something of a puzzle to the people of the town, who—or many of them, at least—had been uncertain whether to set him down simply as a sport, who was holding back until he found game worth the plucking, or was a man who came to Oro for the sake of legitimate business, and was biding his time until a suitable opportunity for investment should occur. The latter class had the better of it now; and there was speedily a rumor that his partner had joined him, and had come prepared to stay. What precise business they had in view was uncertain, but no doubt there would be a boom of some kind.

Abel Kain could have given a different explanation, but he held his peace, and all that was done during the day served to strengthen the general supposition.

Not much apparent progress was made in their general quest, but when evening came Horace Daniels expressed himself satisfied.

"I do not want to take up your time too exclusively, he said; "but so far I have only seen the outside of Oro. In the evening one can get at the inside a little better; and there will be more chance to approach those who might know something of the things we wish to learn. I may be wrong, but, in case you think it is safe to do so, I would like to visit the saloons a little, after the work of the night has fairly begun. I see they have them here in great number and variety."

"Oro is as well stocked as any town in the mining regions, and I think I can steer you safely through them all. You will find toughs at the Ready John, regular sports at the Mint, and the devotees of Terpsichore shaking the light, fantastic toe in a masked carnival at the Casino. We will try them all, if you say so; and then, if you want to meet the old-timers, who can tell you all about the early days of the town, and how things boomed in those days, you can just sit down here, at the Golden Goat, and listen. I would not be at all surprised to hear some one talking your way, and dealing out valuable information, the very first evening. In such things it is chance that is our best bold, after all."

"A masked ball, eh! I am getting rather old for such vanity; and yet I am not sure but what I would enjoy seeing something of the affair, especially if I could keep Maud from knowing anything about it. You have no doubt observed how terribly she is in earnest. She would think it little short of sacrilege, descending to such frivolity. Can I really count on you; and will it be possible for one to see something of the dance without being discovered?"

"Yes, to both questions—unless there is an accident, and the coroner has occasion to inspect

the remains. In that case I suppose you would not care very greatly."

"You are trying to frighten me; but I assure you that it will not work. If you can arrange for a place to put on our costumes, and provide one for yourself, I think I can manage to look enough like a Turk to pass muster. I don't want to be too unique or suspicious might be excited; so that you must not criticise the outfit which I will use."

"No danger of that. I will have need of a little leniency myself, since I am not sure that I can get very near to nature when I turn up as a wild Indian. I had provided the rig for the last occasion, but something happened to prevent, and I did not go. The thing takes in early, and keeps up late, so that you can make a full night of it if you want to. I will see how the land lies, and be back in an hour or so. Keep yourself in readiness, and ask no questions about it from any one. There will be more frolic than business, but I suspect that you are equally ready for either."

"If he was the genuine article I would say that he would turn out to be not a half bad sort of a fellow, thought Mr. Jackson.

"But somehow it strikes me that he is going to the Casino for more than the fun that will be in it; and if I don't learn something about the pair, that they have not given a hint of so far, I am vastly mistaken. About when will I get time to cultivate the seeress? She has the key to the affair, and yet I seem bound to waste my time in the outside machinery of what must be a very pretty little plot. It is time that Dennis was back from his explorations. If he has learned anything I think I will have to turn the fortune-teller over to him as the next job. She must know more of Ilma than I gave her credit for at first; and it is barely possible that she has something to do with this man Daniels. They are hot after my trail for some reason, and I have had warning enough that when they have got all the information they can pump out of me they will be willing that I should retire."

Mr. Jackson was not going into this thing with his eyes very tightly shut, even if he was not certain what was the meaning of all he had seen and heard.

Dennis had not come in, but that was no cause for alarm. The Irishman could be as cautious as any one when he knew there was danger; and after what had happened to the Gent from Jaybird there could be no doubt that the man who explored around the Dandy Belle was doing it at his own risk. He was passing along the hall to his own room when he was met by Miss Minnie.

She held up her hand warningly.

"One good turn deserves another, and I want to say a word to you if you will listen to it without asking questions. You are able to take care of yourself, I think, under most circumstances, but I want to warn you to be careful in your dealing with the man who has been your companion to-day. I am pretty sure that he means you no good; and that if he thinks it to his interest he will not care how he removes you from his way."

"Thanks, for the caution, though I think I would have been just as watchful if you had not spoken. There is something familiar about the two though I have not been able to place them, so far. Perhaps you could help me. I saw that you recognized them, on first sight."

"There it is. I knew that you would be apt to misunderstand me, and I suppose I should not have spoken at all. I could see their faces when you were not looking at them, and imagined that I could read their thoughts. If I made a mistake it could do no harm to put you on your guard; and if I was right you ought to be able to understand without further explanation. I cannot waste time in helping you to guess what it is that they have in view if your own thoughts cannot supply the explanation. Good-evening!"

Evidently she was anxious that she should not be seen speaking to him, for she hurried resolutely away, with the air of one who had done what she considered a disagreeable duty, and was determined to hear no more of it.

Mr. Jackson looked after her, in a perplexed sort of way.

"I wish I knew how much of a Jesuit that young lady really is. There is certainly a resemblance in figure and size, when one looks a little closer. They might be sisters, for that matter; and it is strange that I never noticed before that there is a suggestion of Ilma about both of them."

It seemed strange that he had taken so little notice of Miss Minnie, though he had so promptly struck in when he imagined that she needed his services. The fact was that, as he found her an established resident, he had taken it for granted she was an old settler; and he came to her aid simply because she was a woman. He wished now that he had cultivated her more, and he mentally decided that he would keep a watch for her at the Casino, and if he saw her there would try to renew the conversation, which had just come to such an unsatisfactory ending.

In his own room he picked out the costume which he intended to wear, and after looking it

over did it up in a bugle, and then lit a cigar. While he smoked he pondered, and was in a brown study when he was a trifle startled by the breaking of a glass in the window which was almost behind his head. At almost the same instant something dropped on the floor.

Looking down he saw a little bundle, and understood that some one had taken a notion to communicate with him without being seen. He picked up the package, and found that it was a paper, tied to a small stone. Opening it out, he read:

"More than one person is searching for Cool Charlie, and meaning him no good, either. If you go to the Casino to-night, be on your guard. Sweet William may be dangerous, but you will be more apt to meet with harm in the house of your friends. Unless you are willing to fight the avengers to the death, it would be better for you to retire."

The chirography was distinctly feminine, and at the end of the note there was something which looked like a partially erased "R."

"Another warning. One would think I was falling into a regular hornets' nest. And this from a woman, too. If that is really an 'R,' it might stand for Ramah, and in that case I should judge that it is worth the considering. The seeress generally knows what she is talking about, though she could hardly suppose that I would turn tail and run on a hint no more definite than that. Only shows the strength of my first conclusion, that if I seemed to let her alone I would find her coming my way. She knows something about Cool Charlie, and wants to know more."

And so it was, that with unconcerned face, but doubly warned and entirely on his guard, Mr. Jackson set out to pilot Horace Daniels around the town. There were other places which they intended to visit first, but it was at the Casino that the sport looked for developments, if any there were to be, in the course of the evening.

CHAPTER XXV.

SWEET WILLIAM TELLS HIS STORY.

ABEL KAIN had an office, of course, and in the course of a day he had callers of all sorts and sizes; but it must be confessed that he was somewhat surprised when, on looking up at the sound of a heavy footstep, his eyes fell upon the tough known to Oro as Sweet William.

Although he was hiding it as much as possible Kain had no love for Mr. Jackson, and had been revolving in his mind the how and when of one of those after-claps of which Chet Palmer and others had spoken.

In his thoughts Sweet William had occupied rather a prominent place, though he had not yet settled how he could be used to the best advantage. To see him there was suggestive.

"Good-mornin', boss," said William, sturdily, and with the frank look on his face which belonged to his sober moments.

"I have heard that you are one of the sort of men who never get mad when a fellow tries to give a pointer that may have nothing in it, but might have rocks behind it. And I have heard, too, that you don't ask too many fool questions when you once see that ye'r on dilligence ground. If there is nothin' in what I'm goin' ter say, jest set me straight, and say, good-mornin', Mr. William; that is old news, and not worth a cent."

"Trusting that if it is you will get the 'quantum meruit,' as the law sharps say. All right. Fire ahead!"

With an affable smile Kain motioned to a chair, lit a cigar, and threw himself back in an attitude of listening. Considering what he had heard at the Ready John he had not a doubt but that he was to receive a revelation in which Mr. Jackson would be concerned.

"You soaked Old Billy Binks for keeps when you wrung the Dandy Belle on him?"

The question was not what he had expected to hear, but it was evidently asked in good faith; and Abel Kain was too shrewd to take offense until he was sure that it was not to his interest to learn its drift.

"If you mean by that, I sold him the full right and title, without reservation, or chance to get out of the bargain, I guess you are telling the truth. He bought with his eyes open, and did not pay an extravagant price for a developed mine. If the lead has dropped on him it is his luck that is to blame more than his judgment. Such things will happen. I don't suppose that you are going to squeal about it. Never heard that you were a side pard of old Billy's."

"Side-pard, nothin'. I am my own side-pard, and I wouldn't mind seein' the old reperbate hung up fur all he war wuth; but I thought mebbe that it would be wuth somethin' to a man ez would give an opine that perhaps the lead hadn't dropped jest ez fur ez some people thought it had."

"I am afraid, Sweet William your opinion is no good. I would sooner take it, anyhow, on a matter of draw than in something that demands a mining expert to understand the position."

"Kinder queer that old Billy never kicked, though. Looks ez though he might know more about it than he thinks ther rest of the world does. An' thar's a gent in town—er war, lately—thet knows a good thing when he sees it, an' I reckon he would have cashed over a heap more duckats than Billy did if he had known the Dandy war in ther market. He come too late, but he made a heap big try ter make the ole man sick ov his barg'in."

"You mean Jackson—the new fellow, who boards over at the Goat?"

"That same. You needn't be afeared to know all about him. He's a good man, if he did down me once when I warn't lookin' fur him; an' several times when I war. I kin give the devil his due, even ef he hes bin after me with a sharp stick. An' I reckon I'm in ther course ov gettin' even. Yer needn't say anything about that, though."

It began to look as if there was something of interest in the communication, after all. Kain understood that the man was waiting for some sort of an assurance before speaking plainly, and he gave it to him squarely enough.

"See here, William, I think you are a man who can be trusted; and I know that I am. Don't let us beat around the bush when we can come right to the point. If you can tell me anything about the Dandy Belle that I don't know, and ought to know, I will make it right with you on your own figures. And if you can tell me anything about Mr. Jackson that will do me any good, I can make you the same promise. Now, fire ahead!"

"All right, boss. Which one comes first? And, in course, I stay in the background. What I tell you goes no further, with me ez the father ov it. I'm purty sure that you hev a heap sight more lib'ral notions than ther rest ov Oro. Leastwise, I'd sooner trust yer."

"I have gone over that ground once; don't be tedious, or I may not care to listen to your story at all."

Sweet William still hesitated. He was pretty sure of his ground, and yet it was a delicate matter to approach.

After a few seconds of consideration he appeared to make up his mind, and spoke in rather a nervous way.

"Say, boss, honest Injun, kin this hyer Jackson be a side-pard ov yourn, thet war playin' ter pull ther wool still funder over ther eyes ov old Binks? I want ter make sure, 'cause ef he are, I better keep hands off."

"And if he is not?"

"Then, I want to know what to do with him. I've got him good and foul. All I must do is to say, stay thar—an' he stays."

William lowered his voice, and looked at his vis a vis inquiringly. It argued well for his powers of penetration that he was able to guess that the communication would be one of interest to the gentleman before him. He was both disgusted and taken aback when Abel Kain threw himself back in his chair and began to laugh heartily.

"It's no laughin' matter for him, boss. Ef anything war ter happen ter me, I reckon he'd starve."

"And you would like to be convinced that you had sudden business over at the Gulch, that would keep you away for a week?"

"That's as you say, boss. Prehaps it wouldn't be a laughin' matter with the Gent from Jaybird."

"Oh, William, quit. You make me tired. I had the pleasure of shaking hands with Mr. Jackson not more than half an hour ago; and as he had just surrounded one of Gizeon's heartiest breakfasts, he did not look like a man who was in danger of immediate starvation. In fact, I think he would last more than a week without another meal."

Here was a stumper for Sweet William, who had not been around town to hear the news. He stared at Abel Kain in a bewildered way, until he had made sure that there was no jest in the statement, and then turned to go.

"Nuf ced. I give it up for this time. The gent comes out Jaybird after all. But I had him all the same; I'll swear I had him. How in the name ov wrath he got away stumps me. Don't think it war guff I war givin' yer, fur I laid down ther truth ez I knowed it, straight ez a string."

"And the pointer about the Dandy Belle, that you were going to give me. Was that another of the same sort?"

William halted, and turned half-way around. "No mistake, boss, but what this thing breaks me all up. I ain't half so sure ez I war thet I know anything about the Dandy Belle thet you an' Billy, an' half a dozen more don't. I'll keep that fur another time, an' go see what's the matter with Jackson."

"There's nothing the matter with him. You may be sure of that. But, wait a little. I couldn't help having a smile at your expense; but I will make that all right in good, solid cash if you will tell me all about what you thought you had done to corral the gentleman. And as for the mine, you have not given me enough of a hint to guess what your information is like, but you shall have twenty-five, anyhow, and as much more as it is worth. Now, begin at the

beginning, and fire ahead. This is business, and nothing else. Take that chair again, and feel at home. I am listening."

Kain was sober enough now; and Sweet William saw that his chance had come at last. He seated himself and began to make a clean breast of it.

"I won't get very far afore you will see that this is a story I wouldn't care to tell everybody. It runs about this way:

"The gent and I had some trouble about a young lady, not long ago. Between you and me that was right enough, and if ther had not bin anything else, I guess I could hev stomached the beatin', an' let ther matter drop. But ther other night, me still bein' on ther tear, we had it ag'in. He war fresh ez ever, an' took up fur a stranger, which me an' a couple ov my pards bed calkerlated ter down. I would hev hed him down, with a lead shaft clean through his gizzard ef that little Irishman thet trains behind him hed not chipped when ther game war most excitin'; an' between 'em they held 'way over me."

"Then I got good an' ready, an' camped on ther war-path. When the two went out ov town I went out, too—an' a pard ov mine went with me."

"Then this is not an exclusive article of news that you have been trying to give me?"

"A pard an' me allers counts ez one. If I make a mistake in that I kerrect it, an' look fur another man."

"We trailed 'em out to ther Dandy Belle. Thar he left ther Irishman on guard, while he went down ter hev a talk with Old Billy."

"I reckon they don't know anything about the second shaft. It's a new wrinkle, that helped us out. While Dennis war watchin' ther one, pard an' me slipped down t'other, an' folloed ther drift ez keerful ez a pair ov tiger-cats after a dinner."

"We found him, too. He war doin' a bit ov talkin' to hisself, ez he hedn't found Billy, an' when I heard about all that war wuth listenin' to I hit him a soaker on ther head, thet put him ter sleep solid ez a rock. Then we histed him out by ther new shaft ag'in, kerried him off a matter ov some mile, to a spot ther ain't one man in a thousand kin find, an' slid him down inter a old shaft whar I knowed he would stay tell some one helped him out. I tho't I hed him thar yit; but if you say not itgoes, without lookin' funder."

"A very interesting story it is; and I think has the merit of being true. Some way or other Jackson escaped. Probably the Irishman saw you put him there, and after you were gone helped him out."

"Not a bit of it, boss. I war afeared ov that, an' we took a squint at him. He stayed up on the hill, waiting till nigh sundown; kept his eyes open so sharp thet we couldn't git near him; an' at last went inter town alone. That's ther myst'ry of it."

"Let that go, then. Now, what was it that he was saying to hisself, that made you think there was something about the mine I was not aware of when I sold it to Binks?"

"He war lookin' at a spot on ther floor, an' talkin' about Billy in a way thet made me sure thar war somethin' thar wuth the knowin'. Thar are a stone let inter ther floor, an' onder that stone, ef yer don't find a shaft to ther lead, an' a lower drift, I are a double-barreled liar, all ther way frum Liarsville."

The intelligence did not seem altogether unexpected, for Kain did not evince any surprise; and looked down thoughtfully for a moment. When his eyes rested again on Sweet William it was with a keen and searching glance.

"What is it that you expect me to do to make a profit out of this thing? Unless you have something in your mind, you would hardly have brought the intelligence here. I am not in the habit of giving something for nothing; and I confess I do not see how I am to be profited. Let me hear your scheme."

"If you can't see any, boss, ther's no use fur me to talk. I'll admit I war thinkin' more about ther Gent frum Jaybird than I war about ther drift. What war he doin', nosin' round thar? An' whar war Billy? I ain't opened ther way ter ther lower drift, an' so I don't know what ther are thar, but I reckon it will take coin an' work ter make a strike, even yit. I can't afford 'em, an' ef you don't see anything in it, let her drop, an' I'll go hunt su'thin' else."

"In case I should go into the matter of the Dandy Belle, I might want a good man to look after the work—a man who followed orders without paying any attention to what was in the way, whether it was a man frum Jaybird, or a bumner like Billy Binks. If I had such a man, and a couple other good men, like him, but not too curious, I might be tempted to follow it up; but there is a chance that it would be a business with more fight in it than you have bargained for—and fighting that you wouldn't want Oro to hear the noise of. Are you that man?"

"You ought ter know. Ef yer don't think you kin trust me, say ther word, and I'll go on gittin' even with Mr. Jackson, an' you kin look inter ther Dandy Belle ter suit yerself. Me an' my pard may look at that last ourselves, later on, but I'd sooner work fur wages frum a good

man than go nosin' 'round an' take ther chances."

"I understand. You want to combine profit with amusement, and think you see your chance in this double-headed affair. You are not wrong. You can, if you will; but you may as well go into it with your eyes open. There must be no nonsense about it, and there will be nothing but my say-so that will be allowed to call a halt. I have a man or two on hand already with whom you will have to work. They like Mr. Jackson as little as you do, and had they been in your place I am afraid they would not have been quite so careful when they lowered him into the shaft. They know, too, as you had better know, that I have a long arm; and that there is no drawing back when once they have taken hold of my work. I look after their interests as though they were my own, as long as they are true; but when they go back on me they will be dropped into a worse place than the shaft which did not hold Jackson. How is it? Do you want to join them, and do whatever I put to your hand?"

"That is the platform, boss. If it pays, count me in."

"All right, then. Consider yourself engaged to see this matter through; and here is a little earnest of what you may expect when the accounts are settled on the monthly statement. Of course, I may have other work for you; but from what you have said about this, I do not suppose that you are over particular?"

The eyes of the man glistened as Abel Kain handed him a little package of bills. At a glance he saw there was about a hundred dollars in it, and there was a convincing heartiness about his response that could leave no doubt in Kain's mind as to his having found the tool he wanted.

"Fur this job, er any other job, say the word an' see me buckle down. Ef it's all the same ter you though, I would rather tackle the Gent from Jaybird fu'st. I can't rest n'er eat till I git that score even."

"That will come in course of time; but, just at present, I have need of him, though he will not know it. By the way: do you know anything about what became of Sainly Sam, or his body, the other night? He seems to have dropped out of sight, without any one caring much what became of him. A casual inquiry or two only served to convince me that no one knew anything about him, and it did not strike any one as their business to find out."

"It's a myst'ry, boss, an' that's a fact. Ef I hedn't hed Jackson on the brain I might 'a' looked it up, though pard says that he didn't leave ary footprints behind, an' thet he reckons the devil flew away with him. Sam an' me—but that's somethin' else. We ain't friends, anyhow."

"Then, look around to-day, and see if you can get on his trail; or, if he was really dead, what became of his body. He was very lively for a corpse; but it may have been a last flash in the pan. If you find nothing, be about Ready John's to-night; and if you can vouch for your pard—Danny Duke I suppose it is—have him where we can find him. All the world will most likely be at the Casino, and there may be a chance to get in work elsewhere. If everything is favorable we may know more about the mystery of that lower drift before morning."

"Good enough! I reckon that you won't want to see me hyer too often. Ef I don't call in on you it won't be acause I hev dropped out ov ther game, but thet I'm waitin' fur orders at the Ready John. So long. I stayed longer than I calculated on, but we understand each other a heap sight better than when I came in. I'll look fur Sam ter-day; an' to-morrer I hope ter be huntin' Jackson. I don't want ter know more ov yer plans than you say; an' what you say will go every time. Sweet William may be slow, but he always gits even in the end."

And the tough slouched away, leaving Abel Kain very well satisfied with the result of the interview.

CHAPTER XXVI.

TWO NUNS GO SIGHT-SEEING.

MISS MINNIE'S duties for the day were over, so far as the regular routine at the Golden Goat was concerned. She was in her own room, which by the way, though small was the neatest in the house. Her door was safely secured, and she was just changing her dress, when she heard a light rap without.

"Who is there?" she asked, without suspending operations.

"It is I, Gigson. Excuse me for bothering you, but the young lady who came this morning wishes to see you. I didn't know whether I ought to trouble you, but I thought I would run the risk and see, though I told her I was not certain but what you had gone out."

"Is her uncle with her?" asked Miss Minnie, after a moment of hesitation.

"No. Daniel has gone out with Mr. Jackson. What shall I tell her?"

"I will be with her in a minute. I suppose it is something more than wait on her ladyship. If it is not she will have to look elsewhere for a maid. When my hours are over I would not wait on the Queen of Sheba, and I hope you told her so."

"Yes, yes!" retorted Gigson, hurriedly.

"Don't get wrothy at me. I let her know that I had nothing to do with you after the last dish was washed. I will say that you will see her as soon as you can, and then you can take your time about coming. I don't think you will find her likely to try to impose on your good nature. If she does, just you bolt and it will be all right. So long."

Japhet hurried away before Miss Minnie could have time to reconsider her determination, and when he reached Miss Daniels, altered his song to suit the circumstances, informing her that Miss Minnie would have the pleasure of waiting on her in a few moments. He added a few words of inferential advice, and by that time the young lady made her appearance, wearing a shawl and bonnet.

A glance at Gigson caused him to retire, though he was curious enough to know what was wanted, suspecting that it had something to do with the absence of Horace Daniels, and the Gent from Jaybird.

When they were alone together Maud Daniels arose from her seat, listened at the door to make sure that no one was within hearing, and then approaching Minnie began the conversation in a low tone.

"I am not sure that it is wisdom, but as I have no one else in whom I can confide, I suppose I had better make a virtue of necessity. I have noted your face carefully and have about concluded that you are one to be trusted if you once give your word."

"Conclusions are bad things to trust. I hope my face is not one that seems to invite confidences, for I really want to have nothing to do with them. I have none to give in return; and no time to waste on strangers, whose affairs can be nothing to me. I am frank, you see. If it was for any such purpose as that you sent for me, I had better retire at once. I think that Mr. Gigson would suit you better. He enjoys such things; and I have reason to believe that he will always be found reliable."

"Mr. Gigson will not suit at all. He is in the confidence of my uncle, and I am afraid that I could not persuade him to change his allegiance. And I am sure you are too womanly to desert one of the sex who needs your aid, even if you do not care for the excitement, the amusement and the profit I might offer you."

Miss Minnie heaved a sigh.

"Dear me! I suppose I will have to say I am at your service. The first of your reasons is sufficient. The others are weighty with some, but not with me. I care nothing for amusement, abhor excitement, and am satisfied with the living I am making here. What can I do for you?"

"Perhaps nothing. Let us see. There is a masked ball at a place called the Casino, is there not?"

"You have been rightly informed. This is the evening for the weekly masquerade."

"Then, could you help me to attend? I assure you that it is not out of idle curiosity, but for reasons connected with the business that brought me here. My uncle would object, were I to ask him, and as Gigson is in his confidence the same objection applies to seeking aid from him, were I so inclined."

"I might aid you, I suppose," answered Miss Minnie, showing more interest than she had hitherto done.

"But your uncle ought to be the best judge of where it is safe or expedient for you to go. If you had frankly explained to him your reasons, perhaps—"

"But that is exactly what I could not do. It seems like a sin to doubt him, but I am not sure that he will look at things in the same light that I do. He loves money, and may forget that there is something dearer. I must know what he is doing, to say nothing of the fact that I would meet there certain persons whom I may not be able to see in any other way."

"Perhaps it could be managed, and yet I scarcely care to go to such a place. I went once, and there was trouble about it afterward. A ruffian presumed on the fact of my having been there, and had it not been for the intervention of a gentleman who happened to be near I might have been compelled to protect myself against further insult at the expense of his life. It is not likely that we will have trouble in the hall, but you must go prepared for whatever may happen."

"Thank you for the warning, which will not be thrown away. I will be cautious, though I have no fear. Can you manage the disguise? It seems you were recognized. I do not care to have that happen on this occasion."

"That may not be so easy. I might, perhaps, provide for myself, since I have some odd articles which no one in Oro has yet seen; but, unless we take some one into our confidence, it may be difficult to arrange a costume for you, at this late hour. Gigson could help us, but you do not wish to have him know anything about it."

"Speak to him in your own behalf, then. It will not be hard to throw him off the scent, and I could wear your own apparel. It is a matter of no little importance, I assure you, and I can

afford to pay well for any assistance you may render."

"If I help you at all you may be sure that it is not because I hope to make profit out of it. I may hesitate, but it is because I know more about the place than you do. Necessity knows no law, and I have drifted here in spite of myself, gathering knowledge as I came. It was a weary sort of education, and I should judge that you are not the sort of person to be following in my footsteps. Were you to take my advice you would leave Oro in the morning, and allow your uncle to finish his business here alone. I might tell you, even, that you will be in some danger if you remain, but you would say that was only a guess on my part, and not a very good one at that."

The advice was earnestly given, and made its impression, though not after the fashion which was intended.

"If I was only sure that you are a true prophet, I would accept your prediction with pleasure, and remain all the same, because I would then have reason to believe that I was nearing the end of my quest. I expect danger before it is finished, and am willing to meet it."

"You must be very much in earnest."

"As much as a woman can be who is willing to sacrifice everything to find the murderer of her father. I can have but one regret, and that is that I did not start out sooner on the trail. Had I known all the truth I would have done so. As it is, I hope it is not too late. Having told you this much, you can guess whether it is with the hope of enjoyment that I am visiting the masquerade to-night."

"Yet, a stranger in a strange place, you can hardly expect to accomplish anything. And I hope you have no idea of making a scene in case you should alight upon some discoveries. That would be unpleasant; it would be death to me."

"Have no fear of that. I can repress my feelings, however much in earnest I may be. Were there more time I would give you my story in detail. Some other time if you wish it I will do so. Now, we must prepare. I trust to you to get me the things needed, and to smuggle me out of the house without being seen, if that is possible. If it is not, it will make no great difference, as Uncle Horace will be apt to know about it by morning."

"I will try, then; but remember that I have warned you against it; and you will have to accept the consequences, whatever they may be."

Certainly Miss Minnie did not talk as a waiter and chambermaid at a frontier hotel would be expected to talk; but Maud did not appear to notice the fact. She was not miffed at the advice, and she did not show in any way that she did not consider the other her social equal. She simply remained obstinate in her design; and Miss Minnie, seeing that advice was thrown away, hesitated no longer.

"If the coast is clear I will put you in my room, and then go and speak with Japhet. There may be some trouble to get rid of him as an escort, but I think I can manage that without arousing his anger or suspicion. It will take a little time for him to obtain the costumes, but we can get there before the fun is at its height, and you will have all the opportunity you want to see Oro in her hours of rest and recreation. We will put on the costumes under our other clothing, and by muffling up well I think we can reach one of the private rooms at the Casino without being observed."

"Thanks, but I had better remain here until the last moment, in case uncle should come searching for me. You will find me here on your return. Make haste!"

Once thoroughly committed to the excursion, and Miss Minnie no longer hesitated. She was gone a much less time than might have been expected, and when she returned she had a bundle which she tossed on the bed without much ceremony.

"In Oro, nuns seem to be popular. There will be three or four of them at the Casino to-night, not including ourselves. It may make an awkward mistake if we are not cautious; but on the other hand it will be easier to conceal our identity. Get yourself ready as soon as you can, and I will be with you again in a few minutes."

Every thing seemed to work into their hands, and they were able to slip out by the rear entrance without attracting attention.

At first they turned their steps in a different direction from that which they wished to go, and strolled carelessly along, keeping a wary lookout to see that they were not followed.

They could see no one in their rear when they looked over their shoulders from time to time, but before long they noticed a man in front of them, who appeared to be drifting about as aimlessly as they were. He slouched along, with his head hanging down, and his arms half-way folded behind his back.

"Who, who is that?" asked Maud, giving her companion a touch. "He looks like a conspirator or a fool."

"That," said Miss Minnie, allowing her eyes carelessly to rest upon the man, "is not a conspirator, though he may be a fool. In fact, he is generally credited with not having more

sense than the law allows. He has lately given Oro about as much chance as I have to talk. His name is Billy Binks; and he has bought a mine called the Dandy Belle from the shrewdest dealer in Oro. Should you hear any one speak of Old Billy Binks you are to understand that our friend yonder is the fellow. I don't know what he is doing here, this time of night, unless he is going to the Casino. If so, wonders will never cease. He is the last man I would suspect of having a regard for the amusements of this world. But, you never can tell. If I find him there I will dance one set with him if he will have it, just to find out what his object was in coming to such a place."

"Binks! Binks! It seems to me that I have heard the name; perhaps mentioned in connection with my uncle's inquiries in regard to the gentleman he has engaged to assist him in his search. Poor man, he looks almost broken-hearted. I wonder if he has discovered that he has been swindled?"

"Cannot say, but if there is an opportunity we will ask him. But, here we are, within hailing distance of the Casino. Keep quiet now, and we will try to enter without attracting observation. Ah!"

The exclamation was caused by the discovery that Abel Kain had but just come out of the building, and was passing down the street. His back was toward them, and it was possible that he was unconscious of their presence, but Miss Minnie had uncomfortable doubts.

CHAPTER XXVII.

WHAT THE NUNS OVERHEARD.

As has already been hinted, the owner of the Casino tried hard to have strict attention paid to the proprieties—as understood at Oro City. Especially were ladies protected from anything like insult, though occasionally it was necessary for them to dodge a flying bullet, or get out of the way of a straggling rush, as some man with more whisky under his coat than brains under his hat, was forcibly ejected by the bouncer of the establishment, assisted by a self-appointed committee in case it was required.

There was a bar connected with the establishment, of course, and the chief profit of the proprietor rested in its being well patronized; but on the evenings devoted to Terpsichore the patrons dipped too deeply at their own risk.

The ladies of the town were free and welcome, but the men who intended to occupy the floor purchased their tickets, and took their turns according to number in the quadrilles. The round dances were generally open to all, and it was so announced by the floor manager.

Maud Daniels looked around her with some curiosity. As the reader understands, she was accustomed to various phases of life in the West, even in its rougher shapes; but there was something new in this. The dance was at its height, the fiddlers who furnished the music were sawing away for dear life, the man who called the figures was in a red-hot perspiration, and the grotesque-looking dancers were bouncing over the floor with a vigorous enjoyment she had never seen excelled.

Around the large room, on three sides, at the distance of perhaps a yard from the walls, was a row of benches, on which the dancers as well as the spectators could rest themselves. On the fourth side the space was still wider, and was partly filled with little tables, scattered around, at which those who chose to pay a somewhat extra price could sit and discuss the liquid refreshments ordered from the bar, the latter being located in an adjoining room. This arrangement kept the floor clear, since those who wished to move about could do so without passing in the way of the dancers. In case there was an extra large gathering, those who stood were kept behind the benches, and uncomfortable crowding was thus avoided.

This evening the hall was fuller than usual, and the two nuns hoped that they were lost in the crowd. They made their way along the aisle in the rear of the benches, until they came to a corner, and there stood by the wall, looking about them in a furtive way, searching for Horace Daniels and his supposed companion.

"Yonder is my uncle," said Maud, at length. "He is dressed as a Turk, and has a beard which conceals his face. Did I not know that to be the costume he would assume I should not have recognized him. He does not care to be seen, though he will not be likely to escape observation. Let us edge along in that direction."

"A moment or two. He is talking to no one, so there is no hurry. I do not see Mr. Jackson, and until he comes there will not be much to find out. Better keep our places till the people get a little used to us. We will not then be so apt to excite remark as if we moved around freely."

The advice was too good to be neglected, and the two remained where they were, keeping a watch on the man in the distance, and gradually becoming somewhat interested in the conversation which they could hear going on in their neighborhood.

By chance there were several men near who were discussing the affair at the Ready John.

"An' Sain'tly Sam come ter life after all?"

"That's what they say. Jumped right up on his feet and began ter slaughter right an' left. Cleaned ther house out in no time, an' then left. Thar ain't been hide ner buff seen ov him since; but ther boys think mebbe it war on healthy fur him ter stay 'round hyer after ther way he'd fooled 'em all, an' lit out fur ther Gulch—er some other place whar they won't keer ter foler him."

"That puts me in mind. I hed been to Lanty McGuire's holdin' down a chair with a couple more ov ther boys at draw, and war gettin' home about ther time ther racket must 'a' bin windin' up. I seen two men on ther other side ov ther street, one ov 'em helpin' ther other along, sort ez though he war weakly like. Course I couldn't swear ter figgers at that distance, but sence you spoke I jest bin a-thinkin', w'ot's ther matter with ther sick feller bein' Sam, hisself? Ther other I wouldn't be sure of, fur I didn't pay much 'tenshun, but if I recomember right he warn't ez tall ez Sam by some inches. Bet yer ther Saint are jest layin' low tell he gits straight on his pins ag'in, an' then he'll be comin' out ter git good an' even."

"Be jest like him. Takes a heap ter kill Sam, though they did say thar war a hole plumb through his head. Wonder what that kid war after ez war tryin' ter ask questions?"

"Dunno; but Sam warn't in ther humor ter answer 'em, that's sure. Reckon that's what made him jump ther twig so sudden like. You never kin tell much about him by his looks, an' he fooled ther stranger good, ter say nothin' ov ther racket he worked on ther boys. I heard that ther man that's bin trottin' town ter-day along with ther Gent from Jaybird war askin' some folks about Sam. 'Pears like ez though ther Saint war in demand jest now, but it's hard ter tell fur what. This old codger don't look like a detective."

"Not much. But, hold hard. Ef thar ain't Billy Binks! What in wrath does he want at ther Casino? 'Magine him shakin' a leg! Swar ter gracious, but I b'lieve ther coon's drunk."

Sure enough, through the doorway which led to the bar-room Billy Binks lurched unsteadily, and though he managed to avoid any actual collision, he more than once escaped coming to grief by a miracle before he had brought up in the neighborhood of the Turk, and thrown himself heavily in a chair.

The conversation which the nuns had been hearing had interested them—one of them especially—but it was over now, since the men adjourned to the bar-room, after seeing that Billy was not going to proclaim himself a chief, or otherwise announce himself on the war-path. For any such extravagance as that they would have waited, but as he dropped his head on his breast and seemed inclined to slumber, he ceased to be an object of interest to them.

"You would hardly care to redeem your promise and dance with him?" whispered Maud, seeing that her companion was watching the old fellow sharply.

"That would depend on whether I thought he was as drunk as he looks. The old fellow has something in view, and perhaps it is time to get closer to your uncle. They may have some conversation together which you would like to hear."

In spite of the risk they ran of being discovered through a nearer view, they moved along until they were in position behind the two men, and able to overhear whatever might be said in a conversational tone.

"Say, who yer lookin' at?" growled Billy, as he caught a twinkle of the eyes that were half-hidden in the beard that was turned toward him.

"Don't get excited, old man," was the response in a low voice, and certainly not the one which Maud expected to hear.

"I suspect that I am looking at you, but there is nothing in that to shoot a man for. A cat can look at a king, and if I am a turbaned Turk to the rest of mankind, it is no reason why you might not find a friend if you looked long enough in return. I am willing to stand the gaze."

Billy gave a start and a stare. He was not as drunk as he had seemed, though no doubt he had been drinking.

"I orter know that voice, an' it's not the one I thought it was goin' ter be, either. I'll swear! It's Cool Charlie, large as life! Steady, pard! I didn't mean it," as he caught what seemed an angry movement.

"I'll take that back; but you look 'nough like him in the voice to be his twin brother. Who are you, anyhow?"

"Guess you ought to know, if you think a little. I was out to see you yesterday, and got a warm reception. Served me right for monkeying around when the gentleman of the house wasn't at home. Did you come to tip me that welt over the back of the head? If so, you have more nerve than the boys have been giving you credit for."

"Then you're Jackson, from Jaybird," retorted Billy, bending over, and accommodating his tones to those of Mr. Jackson.

"You needn't blame me with that lick—ef I could I'd 'a' saved yer that. I saw ther man w'ot done it, though, an' I reckon you kin guess

who it war thet throwed yer a rope when you war in a tight place, with no way ov gettin' out ef Billy hadn't bin 'round."

"Just what I thought, though why you didn't stay to help me up was more than I could see. The fools left my shootin'-irons with me, and if they had tried to mount me when I had a fair chance, I don't think I would have grumbled, even if there had been a dozen. While I was down there I was just praying for a chance to get even. And I wanted to see you, anyhow. Don't know that it is my say-so, but there may be something about the Belle that don't belong to you any more than it does to me. You are bound to get your money back; but I am not so sure that Abel Kain had a clean title when he sold out. And then, there are the fellows who went for me. They were not snooping around for any good. You will have to look out for them. And who were they, by the way? I don't let such little attentions pass without proper notice."

"You ought ter know. Thar's only about one man in town thet has it in fur you bad enough ter follow you out that fur, an' run ther risks, ter git yer in sich a hole. I don't say thet there mayn't be a man behind him; but Sweet William had reason enough ov his own, an' that war ther first letters ov his name. Much obleeged to yer fur standin' up fur me, but ef you hed asked me private, like, p'raps I'd 'a' told yer thet I war ready fur Abel Kain, any day in ther year, an' that he made nothin' offen Old Billy, salt er no salt."

"That is all right, and glad to hear it; but there is one thing more, Billy, that I suppose I ought to tell you. I wouldn't like to see you sold out, but it may be that a party who has a better right to the Dandy Belle than you have will be coming that way. If they get there, better be ready, with your mind made up what you will do. It won't pay to fight, and bluff won't go down worth a cent. Make the best terms you can; and if you got a half-interest, it would be the better for you, as there would be capital behind you, and some hope to develop."

"When ther man with ther better title comes he kin have it. Mebbe it's that man I see yer 'round town with ter-day. I don't ask yer ter give him away, but I'll give yer a warnin' back. Don't trust yer back his way, er you may git a knife er a bullet. I ain't sure thet I ever see him afore, but that's w'ot his face says ter me; an' faces don't lie, no matter how you fix 'em up."

"Thanks, old man. That is not the first warning I have received about him, but I think I can take care of myself. Now, if you please, don't give me away. I have no particular business here, but I do not care to be recognized. It might make a disturbance."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WHO THREW THE KNIFE?

THE Turk arose and moved away, directing his steps toward the doorway which led to the bar-room, leaving Billy to cuddle up in his chair, in what seemed almost helpless intoxication. He was evidently playing a part, though for what purpose it was hard to guess.

Cautiously as the interview had been managed, the nuns had overheard the greater part of it. What had become of Horace Daniels was not so certain, though it began to seem certain that he had not visited the Casino at all.

"What did he mean by calling that man Cool Charlie? It was certainly the gentleman known to us as Mr. Jackson."

Maud whispered to her companion while keeping a watch on the figure near them.

"Perhaps they have met before. The voice did not sound like Jackson's, but you are correct in supposing that it was he. They talked something of a mine, and the owners of it. Was there anything in that which suggested something to you?"

"Much. It may be that our quest is much nearer its close than we had supposed. It is as well that my uncle did not stand in my place. Jackson may be true to us, yet it sounded much as though he was willing to sell us out to that raganuffin, in case our interests should clash with his, as I begin to believe that they may."

"Or else he thinks that Old Billy would be as good a man as any to point out as your game. Do not be too rash in your conclusions. The West is a region of surprises, and the truth may be even stranger than you have yet imagined. I must speak to that man myself. If you are really the daughter of Dan Daniels he may have something to tell that will be of more interest than you have dreamed, and I alone can force it from him."

"What do you mean?" asked Maud, astonished at the earnestness with which her companion was speaking.

"What do you know about Dan Daniels, or the inner secrets of our quest? I have told you but little and nothing that could cause you to connect this man with us."

Miss Minnie laughed.

"Ha, ha! Are you as innocent as you would have me believe? How could one listen to what those two were saying without understanding what might be the game. If I hit it closer than

you care, blame yourself for bringing me to the verge of the secret. It is not worth while for you to be indignant until you are certain that I am not your friend. Restrain yourself. An incautious word may attract the attention to us which we have so far been able to escape. Unless you wish to join in the festivities it is best to keep in the background. Things have been very quiet, but there is no telling how soon we will begin to hear the hum of the cyclone."

"You cannot frighten me, and you have not answered my questions—or, at least, you have not given an answer that I can accept as the true one. If you think that yonder man knows anything of the fate of Dan Daniels, or the mine he left behind him, take me to him. He will not refuse to speak, even if it seems to be against his own interest. I can read him like a book. No coward is he, whatever Oro may think of him."

"I believe you are right in that; pity it is I did not make the discovery sooner. But, it is not too late. Be guided by me. Leave this place and I will see the man. He will not refuse to speak with you. Of that I am certain. I will bring him to you at the Golden Goat, and you can question him, and with a better chance to obtain the truth in safety."

"No. I must speak with him at once. There have been too many delays already—too many opportunities lost. Besides, I have not the time. I must speak with him before he meets my uncle, or understands what his revelations may cost him."

"As you choose. And yet—you are too late!"

While they were talking Billy had arisen from his chair, and staggered away from the spot. It looked as though he might have come for the purpose of having an interview with the man who was dressed as a Turk, fancying him to be some one else, and now that he had found out his mistake did not care to remain longer. He passed out through the door which led to the bar before Maud could arrest his progress.

"Yes, too late to follow him there, yet I must see him. Can we not obtain a messenger who will ask him to return? At one of these tables we might have an interview which would at least show whether it was worth while to pursue the matter further."

"Too late for that, also, if I am not mistaken. There is something going on there. Listen! The man has found the trouble for which he was looking! What is going to come of it?"

As Binks staggered out into the bar-room he lurched against a man who was about to enter the hall. There was no great damage done, for Billy caught himself in time, but that made little difference to the fellow, since it was Sweet William, and he was there to be stumbled over.

With a muttered oath he drew himself up and gave a violent thrust, with the intention of hurling Binks to the floor.

It looked such an easy matter to do, that Sweet William was careless, and before he could recover himself from the effort which he knew on the instant had failed, Old Billy had hold of him.

"Cuss ye!" he gritted. "You would strike a man old enough to be your father, would ye? Two men has to have a say-so about that."

It was hard to say whether the old man was drunk or sober; but, either way, he proved himself, for the first time in his history in that camp, to be a man of strength and skill. He forced the tough backwarl toward the wall, holding him at arm's length by a grip on his throat which Sweet William found it impossible to break, try as he might. He struck out savagely but his blows failed to connect, and before he could twist himself aside he was pinned up, as it were, and Old Billy was scowling in his face.

"You mis'erable wretch! Ef I didn't know that thar war a man behind yer eggins' yer on, I'd crush yer whar yer stand. Han's up, an' swar the thing stops hyer er I'll lay yer whar ther dogs won't bite."

It was all done so suddenly that no one understood the affray until Binks had the upper hand, and Sweet William was raising his hands as if in obedience to the order. Then there was a rush in that direction, when there came a sudden cry, not loud but agonizing, and Billy, loosening his hold, sunk to the floor, his hand clutching at his side, while Sweet William with his hands still up gazed down at him with a look of utter amazement at the way the fracas had ended.

"What's all this?" asked Mart Hammers, one of the proprietors, who was on the spot before the groan had fairly ended.

"Here, you! What have you been doing?" His revolver covered the tough as he spoke, and he looked as though he would pull trigger at the least movement.

"Can't prove it by me," answered William, hastily gathering up his wits. "The fool war blind, blazin' drunk I should say, and mounted me without word er warnin'. I seen how he war, an' war tryin' ter git out ov his hold 'bout hev'in' ter send ther cuss over ther range. Somebody cut 'him, but yer can't say it war me. Thar's ther knife now."

He pointed to a short but heavy blade which

lay on the floor near to the wall. It was as bright as ever, but that was no reason why it might not have inflicted the gash in the side of Binks, to which the latter was pressing his hand.

Hammers looked doubtfully at the rough. He had too bad a reputation for Mart to altogether believe that he was trying to avoid a fracas, even with such a well-known individual as Billy Binks, who was supposed to have the freedom of the camp from his unconquerable pusillanimity. If he had not a very clear case he might have been roughly handled.

But, there were too or three men there who could at least vouch for it that Sweet William had nothing to do with the stabbing, and Mart, putting away his revolver, bent over the old man, whose hurt was being examined by several of the spectators who had been nearest to the spot.

"Hyers the knife w'ot done the work," continued Sweet William, speaking now to the crowd at large, and holding up the weapon which he had picked from the floor. "All Oro knows that I never owned sich a blade ez thet, an' I don't reckon that any man hyer 'cept the one w'ot throwed it ever saw ther blade afore. It don't b'long to no pard ov mine, fur ef I had one he'd know ez I kin fight my own battles; an' hyer's one ez says ther man w'ot throwed it—fur I guess that's ther way ther trick war done—hez got ter have a taste ov Oro justice. Look 'round, boys, an' see w'ot strangers are in ther room."

"Better wait and see how bad the old man is hurt before you get up a mob," interposed Hammers, looking up from his half kneeling posture on the floor. "We don't want Judge Lynch howling around here unless there is a call for him that's louder than I think this is going to be. It was a pretty close thing of it, for the man that chucked that knife know his business well enough, if he really meant it, but a miss is as good as a mile, and Billy Binks won't die this time, though I guess he will lay off work for a day or two. There's a hole there, but it's not as wide as a church door, nor as deep as a well. When we get a plaster and a bandage on he will be all right for the present. All the same, William, I think that you have business in some other section of the town, and it wouldn't be a bad idea for you to attend to it. It's a little thin to ask us to believe that you would have been so meek and lowly when Billy was attempting to impose on you. No back talk, but get a move on you, and mighty sudden. I'll look after the man who threw the knife."

In his own house a man can talk with more firmness than he would care to do elsewhere. Mart Hammers thought he saw the incipency of a raid, and determined to either crush it out at once, or bring matters to a crisis before there was further time for the outsiders to organize. He was a little surprised to see that Sweet William received his rebuke in an unwonted spirit of meekness.

"Jest ez you say, boss. Sooner than have any mistake about ther matter, I'll sherry right along, but ef there's any man in the house thet thinks I ain't give straight goods, er thet I ort ter be brought ter book, he'll find me at ther Ready John, on hand ter give an account ov myself any way he wants it. So long, pard! Fix it up ter suit yerselves, an' tell Billy when he comes 'round thet I ain't bearin' any ill-will."

"Goes off too blamed willing," muttered Mart to himself. "There is a game about it, some-way; but, guess it ain't my business. Billy don't seem elected, but he has a mighty ugly hole in his side, all the same."

"And I'd give a big apple to know who put it there," said a man in the garb of a Turk, but with the voice of Mr. Jackson.

"Ask your pard," whispered Billy, feebly, as the man from Jaybird bent lower.

"If he don't know who threw that knife, who does?"

CHAPTER XXIX.

SOME ONE MAKES A MISTAKE.

"I KIN tell somethin' about that," spoke up a strange voice at Mr. Jackson's elbow. "I don't know who done it, because I'm a stranger hyer, but I saw him, all the same, an' if I describe what there war ov him in sight, though he had a mask on, p'raps some ov you may be able ter ketch on."

Mr. Jackson, as well as every one else near, looked curiously at the speaker, and saw that he was a stranger. Moreover, he had his left arm in a sling, and his face had something of a pale cast, in spite of the browning it had received from long exposure to the sun and wind. He was dressed after the fashion of a cowboy, and under his arm carried a coiled whip, that looked as though it might do good execution at quite a distance.

"Talk up, then, and we will take your word for it as long as we don't find out different. It's nothing worse than a lay-off for a few days, and Billy can afford that if any one can; but when such a thing happens in our house, we want to know who was at the bottom of it. Then, if we don't stop his wind off altogether, we give a hint that this is not the place he is

wanted for the present. That hint generally goes, and if it don't, there is apt to be a funeral in earnest."

"That's right and white," answered the man with an arm in a sling. "I'm behind you in that, an' that's the reason I'm willing to speak now. Fer a fair fight, in open sight, Happy Jack is allers on hand. But fer sluggin' in the dark, er cuttin' in ther back, er sich, he puts his foot down ef he has a chance. Ther way ov it war this:

"With a sore arm I don't feel much like bein' too deep in ther crowd, an' the blasted bone—which war smashed by a mustang—hurt so I couldn't stand it by myself in the dark. I war layin' back, along ther wall, keepin' an eye out fur all the fun thet might be goin', an' I see the leetle flare up betwixt the feller they call Sweet William, and the man on the bench."

"It war not prezactly ez he said, fur ter me it looked ez though he war b'ilin' fur a fight; but I'll swear that he didn't do the knife trick, fur the old coon had him foul so quick that he jest had time ter git his hands above his head. But, jest then, a feller from the next room, thet looked like a genuine copper-skin, stepped through the door, give one squint, an' then threw his hand along so, an' at the same time I caught the gleam ov a knife, an' beard a rip, an' then a chug, when the blade dropped to the floor. Then I saw Billy take his hand off ther throat ov ther galoot, feel ov his side, an' slide down in a heap. That's ther hull story ez fur ez I see it. What yer want ter do are ter look fur ther man dressed like a Injun, an' see if ther knife ez fits his scabbard are a-missin'. Then yer got him."

"Say! What's the matter with it havin' been Jackson, from Jaybird?" asked a voice from the crowd.

"I know he war comin' hyer a week er so ago ez a Injun, an' like ez not he's got hyer this time."

"Because Jackson don't chuck his knife around as long as he has legs to carry it where he wants to put it; and because Jackson is here now, and has been all the time."

And the man at Billy's elbow raised the mask on his face and disclosed the features of the Gent from Jaybird.

That seemed to be sufficient answer to the question, for it really had been asked in good faith, by a fellow who knew what he was speaking of, and had no particular ill-feeling toward Mr. Jackson. Three or four men, who had halted to hear the question and the response it elicited, bolted for the dancing-hall, in search of a man wearing the costume of an Indian. It was not that they were so anxious to avenge Billy as that he represented a principle. Underhanded work at the Casino would not be allowed. A stand-up fight was bad enough; but an assassination deserved public punishment.

It was not so easy to find such an individual, without making some public announcement which could be heard in the other room. By this time the dancers had found out that something of interest had been going on in the neighborhood of the bar, and there was a throng at the door, part trying to make a way through, and the balance trying to maintain a position where they could see and yet be in comparative safety.

Foremost of this latter line were two nuns, who gazed through their rails at the wounded man, and listened with something akin to horror to the story of Happy Jack.

"It is time that we were getting away from here," whispered Maud, with a tug at the cloak of her companion.

"There is danger in that story—and I have doubts if there is a word of truth in it. The man is a villain, and has not told it without a purpose."

"Go, then. The way is open, and no doubt safe enough. I must know more of this. There may be more truth and reason in what has been said than you can yet understand. You know who it is that wears the costume of an Indian. The disguises were changed, for some reason, or for no reason at all. Warn your uncle if you choose; but I do not think there is any danger of much being said or done after the excitement has had a chance to cool. In spite of what Happy Jack says it would be hard to prove who cast the knife; and people would rather believe that it was Danny Duke, who trains at the back of Sweet William, and who is an expert at such things."

"As you please. I am not afraid to return alone. I have learned much, and hope that I am on the trail of more. Good-night."

Maud was not at all frightened by the turmoil. Had it simply been a riot she might have remained, and seen it to the end, with interest, if not with pleasure.

But the fact was that she had recognized Happy Jack, even before he had given his name; and knew that there might be some truth in his story, since she had caught a glimpse of a man at the door just after Binks had passed through it, who had both answered to her mental description of her uncle, and to that given by the man with his arm in a sling. She knew that he had passed hurriedly along the aisle a moment later; and if it was her uncle

she had not a doubt but that she would find him at the Golden Goat.

She hardly thought of her costume as she pushed her way back through the throng, and instead of seeking the little room in which their masking had been done, passed directly out into the street.

Purposely there was no light there, and as she came out she was but little more than a shadow. There was not the slightest suspicion of danger in her mind, and if there had been she would have gone ahead, though with her senses more on the alert, to meet it. As she turned, and hurried in the direction of the Golden Goat she ran straight into the outstretched arms of a man who was waiting to intercept her.

At the sudden attack she did not lose her self-possession. Her hand darted to her bosom in search of a weapon, and if she had been granted a moment more could have taken care of herself as well as the best.

But the arms closed tighter, gathering her own in a gripe that she could neither resist nor shake off, and she heard a sharp whisper at her ear.

"Quick, before any one comes! This is the woman. Hustle the gag on, and wrap her up well. They are too busy in there to miss her, and if we don't give ourselves away no one will be the wiser."

There was already a hand over her mouth, so that it was impossible to utter a cry; and now, with a threat which effectually prevented any attempt at alarm, a gag was thrust into her mouth, and a cord twisted around her wrists. The work was done as gently as possible, but still it was well done; and almost before she could realize what had happened Maud found herself helpless, and being carried rapidly away from the vicinity of the Casino.

As there did not seem the least chance in the world to escape, the prisoner proved tractable enough, and after a little was set on her feet.

"You really must excuse us, miss, but there is a little tea-party to-night that you have a bid to, and as the party was afraid that you wouldn't come unless the invitation was extra pressing, we got in the work after this shape. But we don't mean you a bit of harm, and if you take it easy, and prove reasonable, I swear that I believe by morning you will be back in your room, and very well satisfied with your adventure. That sounds stiff, perhaps, but it is the Gospel truth. Treat us square, and you sha'n't be hurt. Move along as though you were going to a party, and when we see that you are going to be a woman of sense, we will let up a little. Of course, we have to protect ourselves, but if you only knew it, we are the best friends you got."

It was hard to believe such a statement as this, but it was just as well to seem to do so. It could do no harm, and might help her to an opening for an escape. By a motion she showed that she would accept the terms for the present, and at once there was a change in the manner of her two captors. The gag was not yet removed from her mouth, nor was the cord taken from her hands; but she was allowed to walk freely between them, and they seemed to think that she would need little watching, though they kept up a keen enough lookout for any chance travelers who might be met on the road.

But the hour was too late to hope for rescue, unless, in some way, her abduction became known at the hall, and a regular pursuit was instituted. Not a soul did they see on the way, and finally a halt was made at a little cabin, distant at least a mile from Oro, as Maud judged.

Naturally enough, it was with some shrinking of the heart that she entered this lonely hut, where all was darkness, yet she had felt somewhat easier in her mind since she had heard the promise that she might escape unharmed. This affair began to look to her more like a mystery than an outrage, and she judged rightly when she thought that she was approaching something like a solution.

"Be still for a moment," said her guide. "We want to be sure that everything is right and tight, so that no prying eyes will be attracted to this place, and then we will have a light. To frighten you is the last thing in the world we wish to do."

She heard the careful closing of the door. Then there was the stroke of a match, and immediately after the cabin was no longer in darkness.

There had been an addition to the party. There was a third man, masked like the others, but evidently the governing mind of the set. He wore a cloak, which totally concealed his figure, and his wide-brimmed sombrero was drawn down over his eyes, so that even without the mask, it would have been hard to have caught the true outlines of his face. He looked at his captive, then at the two men, at the same time making a motion which they appeared to understand. Without further pledge or question the gag was taken from her mouth and the straps from her wrists.

Then, at a nod from the leader, the two men left the hut, leaving captor and captive alone together.

CHAPTER XXX.

AT THE ALCAZOR.

"We had an idea that you were a lady of sense, and I am glad to see that we were not wrong. From this time on open dealings will be the best for all of us. Be frank with us and you will find that we can be the same with you, while any effort on your part at concealment of the truth will only cause us to look at you with the eye of suspicion. Of course, what you say here will go no further, but is only to assure us that we have made no mistake. Your actual name, if you please, and the nature of the business which brought you to Oro City? Come, now. You cannot hide them from us, since we are already well aware of them."

"They are no secret," answered Maud, with a strange look at her questioner. "I am here to find out all that concerns my father, Dan Daniels, who sunk the first shaft in these regions, and named it the Alcazor. He was murdered for the gold he had drawn from the mine, but I have reason to believe that the murderer was disappointed, and that the treasure still remains at the bottom of the shaft. That treasure I would find; but it is a secondary matter with me. Most of all I would know beyond a doubt who it was killed Daniel Daniels. Help me in either direction, act squarely with me, and I will forget this outrage and pay you as well as the services deserve. How does it come that you know anything of me and mine?"

"That question can be answered later on. There are other and more important matters first to be discussed. But before that, I want to make you sure that you are in no danger whatever, and that we are going to do you good in spite of yourself. If we promise that in good faith, and prove to you that we are in earnest, and you are returned to Oro unharmed, we will want your solemn oath never to speak of this affair without our permission. When you know the whole truth I think you will be willing enough to give that promise."

"If you are the kind philanthropist you say you are there will be no trouble about that. Save in so far as it may be necessary partially to explain my absence, I will not care to speak of the treatment I have received, not so much on my own account as on yours. Speak frankly, if you can. Under these restrictions you have my promise."

"It will not take long to explain. I have already given you a hint that I knew more about the matter you have in your heart than you could guess. How I found it out makes no difference. Enough that I had an interest in it myself and had already been making some investigations, though without success."

"To-day, happily, I have received some information which points toward a certain spot as being worthy of investigation, and there is no time to lose. We must know to-night whether the old Alcazor has been found, and whether it is a dead lead, or whether it is worth the fight that there must be to hold it."

"But, why this haste? Surely when one has a righteous cause, daylight is better than darkness to bring it to the front."

"Because the one in possession has nine points of the law in his favor, and the tenth point can be the better argued. Because fraud on the ground is better than truth at a distance, and by this time to-morrow, if I am not greatly mistaken, the impostors who have to-day been feeling the public pulse would be entrenched and almost impregnable. I reasoned that it would be impossible to make you understand the truth and importance of all this in time to have you move, and so used the arguments I was sure would be convincing, because I knew that you were a woman of sense, who would not throw away a chance to solve the secret, even if it was offered to her in an unexpected way. Are you ready for the venture?"

"It seems that I have no choice in the matter, anyhow, so that I may as well yield gracefully. Yet I must tell you that it is not wealth which is to me the most important aim. I have no right to bargain with you for the one-half, but the other is mine, whether it be much or little that we find. If I allow you to help me in regard to that, giving to you a fair payment for all the aid which you may give me in that respect, it will be because you do not stop there, but aid me to the end in ferreting out the man who struck the blow at my father's life. I do not understand all the allusions you have made; but, of that, no matter. When I can do no better I have the courage to take a leap in the dark. Waste no more time, then. The end will either explain all, or show that you are as big a villain as you look. And let me warn you that life may not be long, but while it lasts there is time for revenge."

"A moment, then, to assure our friends that it will be all right. They are working under my instructions, but naturally they desire to know what the arrangement is between us."

The man in the mask went to the door, and uttered a low whistle. A moment later and the other masked men returned as silently as when they went.

Having once decided to accept the situation and see it to the end, Maud was as cool as the coolest. She still wore her disguise, though the

vail had been partially pushed aside when the gag was removed from her mouth; and the men were still in mask. Although by no means certain of the meaning of all this, she had a strong suspicion that there was a mistake somewhere, and began to think of some of the utterances of Miss Minnie. It might be that she was to learn more of the plots and plotters than she would of the Alcazor and its former owner.

She gave the assurances which were demanded, and put them in the form of an oath. She watched narrowly; seemed to have no hesitations; and followed without a single objection, though she had no idea at the first what was really the drift of the scheme.

"You have been here long enough to understand that the shortest way to obtain a title to a mine is to jump it; and the principal thing to be sure of is whether the claim is worth the trouble and danger."

"We are going to make sure of that last by an investigation. Should we find that we have been mistaken there will be a chance to retire without any one being the wiser. If we are right—as I have hoped since I heard the intelligence I received this morning—you will be placed in charge, with help enough at your back to hold the claim against the man in whose hands it has lately been, until the justice of your claim has been proved."

"And I suspect that when we have once found the lower drift we will obtain a revelation as to the rest. In that case, if you need a friend to stand by you as you follow up the trail to the bitter end—you will know where to find him."

She answered something; giving no distinct promise, and saying nothing that would commit her more deeply. If these men took her for some one else it would be time enough to undeceive them when she had learned all that they could tell her. She and the leader were in front; and as they went along she could now and then catch fragments of the conversation which those in the rear were carrying on.

"Queer start, that," said one of them.

"Sweet William got the contract off his hands and never knew who took it. Guess he didn't feel like kickin' on it, either. Wasn't a nice job ter do up the old man. Had to be done quick an' lively er thar would be a dozen chip-pin' in to take his part. Everybody knows that the old loon is no fighter, and don't want ter see him imposed on."

"Blame queer how it wound up; an' mighty good that he could show a clean pair ov hands. In course no one would think he would take a knife to the old galoot till he had tried it on to the limit with the scrappers; an' then, he don't go in for steel. He most gen'rally tries ter sling a half ounce of lead."

"That's what. An' somehow I can't help but think that ther feller ez slung that knife meant it fur William hisself. Fired at ther pigeon an' hit ther crow, don't yer onderstand?"

"Anyhow, it left him out, and in heap sight better shape than ef he had kerried it through 'cordin' ter orders. The old man won't be on hand ter-night; an' I reckon that ef he gits about in a week he will do well enough. By that time he can hustle around and see what's what. I reckon the Dandy Belle will be fixed in fine shape."

"Hist! Don't talk too much. Walls may have ears, yer know; an' it's too soon ter be callin' names. It ain't likely ther will be anybody 'round jest now. Them ez are out 'll stay out tell the fun at ther Casino are over. But then, yer can't most allers sometimes tell. They mou't be bringin' Billy home."

"Let 'em bring, ez long ez we git thar fu'st. An' we're almost thar now."

Nevertheless, the warning had its effect, for the voices were pitched in a lower key; and Maud lost the balance of what was said.

At the same time she had heard enough to convince her that the girl of the Golden Goat had been on the right track, and that it was more than ever likely that her uncle had cast the knife; though whether at Sweet William, or at Binks, was still an open question. She wished that she could give him warning; and yet was not so sure that it would be for the best. Mr. Jackson could attend to that, if he was really their friend; and if he was not, it seemed as though she was in a fair way to head him off in any contemplated treachery.

Her guide was remarkably silent. It is true that he was keeping a sharp lookout, ready to take to cover at the first appearance of any one on the trail, though the danger of meeting any wanderer at this late hour was rapidly growing less. But from time to time he regarded her with a look which she could feel if not see, and it was evident that he had much to say, even if he restrained himself.

Once he did speak—and on a subject which Miss Maud could better guess at than understand.

"You need not be alarmed. It is not time to renew our conversation. All that I would have you to understand is that I never threaten, and that I seldom say anything in which the facts will not bear me out. If I do speak again I hope it will be with your permission."

"That may depend upon what the future discloses," responded Maud, enigmatically. "If

the work of to-night is a failure there will be no need to speak further. Until we are assured of how it will turn out, best that we are silent."

"Thanks, a thousand thanks! You have convinced me that I am not altogether misunderstood, and for the present I will have nothing more to say. I can imagine the weight that is on your mind; and that until it is lifted there will be but scant chance of your listening to anything that does not belong to it. I should have understood that sooner; but it took a second thought to show me that. But, here we are. Be silent, now. I imagine that the drift is deserted, and yet one must be prepared for the unexpected."

"We are then—where?"

"As I have reason to believe—at the drift which was sunk by the hands of your father. Within the next hour we will know what it will reveal."

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE HEELS AT THE WINDOW.

THE search through the Casino revealed no sign of the man who had cast the knife, and as no one had seen the Indian and the Turk together that evening, there was nothing to throw suspicion in the direction of Mr. Jackson, or the man who had been his companion during the day.

Of course, more than one had seen the missing masker about the time the knife was thrown, but when he had left, and how, could not be answered when the question was flung around after a quiet fashion, when a search had failed to find the missing man. Mr. Jackson might have given an explanation, but after he had cleared his own skirts, he preferred to keep religiously silent. As a result, the excitement died out in the next quarter of an hour or so, and the festivities went on as though there had been no interruption. The wound of Billy Binks was dressed, and he was helped away by a couple of volunteers, who agreed to watch with him during the night if it seemed necessary; but the general opinion was that a good deal of sympathy had been wasted, and that though Billy would be a little stiff in the morning, in a few days he would be all right again, and able to go to work.

As it did not seem good to Mr. Jackson to be too officious, he rather remained in the background until Billy had taken his departure. A few moments later he started out himself, turning his steps toward the Golden Goat. Of course he was pretty sure that his present employer had made the attempt on the life of Billy, and could only imagine that it was done because Daniels understood that Binks was in possession of the mine for which he was searching, and had not learned how lately the old fellow had acquired the title.

Though Jackson had not yet made up his mind fully as to the course he was to pursue, he was becoming more and more satisfied that there was no mistake about this being the brother of the former owner of the Alcazar. Whether he had a better right to the Dandy Belle remained to be proved to his satisfaction. And as to the young lady, he did not understand her at all. For once his mind failed to aid him, and the more he thought over it the worse became the jumble.

"Lightnings blast it!" he muttered angrily to himself.

"Who is she—and what in the name of Heaven has she to do with the Merton family? She has put me in mind of Ilma, but there is some one else that she resembles more. If Ramah told the truth— But, bah! What use to give a second thought to that mummery? If I had found out what she told Lorrimer, I might have been able to hit it closer in guessing the thing out now; but as it is, I suppose I must wait till I find out. If I was sure that she was as genuine as the other, I might make a clean breast of it; but Billy helped me out of a hole, and I suppose my best plan will be to stand them off till they give themselves away, which they will do sooner or later if they are not the clean white article. I'll sound Daniels on the subject of old Billy, and see what the plummet of truth indicates when it touches bottom. After the warnings I have had, and this little affair of Billy's, it may be as well to remember that I may find him a dangerous man. I think it will be best to handle him with gloves on, anyhow."

At the Goat he found Chet Palmer off duty, and Gigson in his place in the office. Jackson was inclined to think that Japhet knew more about his guests than he had as yet let on; but the worthy proprietor was a man who knew how to keep things to himself when it was expedient, and it seemed hardly worth while to begin an approach for the purpose of conquering knowledge. Of course he had removed his costume before leaving the Casino, and it was with the most innocent face in the world that he inquired for Mr. Daniels, and whether he had yet retired.

"Don't reckon he has retired," replied Gigson.

"Fact is that I have not seen him since you and he left together. If he had come in I would have been sure to drop to him."

"You sure?" asked Jackson, somewhat uneasy, but showing nothing of that in his tone.

"I have struck a point that he ought to know and wanted to meet him to-night. He certainly started for home to go to bed, and if he is not in I hope that nothing has happened to him. Suppose you try his room; and if he really is not about, and the young lady is still awake, ask her if she will speak to me for a moment."

"The spirit is willing, Mr. Jackson, but verily, the flesh is weak. The fact is, I don't think that she is in either. They kept it quiet between themselves; but I can't help seeing what is going on. I think she and Miss Minnie went out to take a look at the fun at the Casino, and they are not back yet. Better either wait a bit till they return—I don't suppose it will be very long till they come—or else drop around that way and bring them in."

"Thanks! If that is the racket I might as well have stayed where I was. I just left the Casino; but as I was not looking for them there I did not catch on. Guess I can tell them if I see them. If Daniels comes in tell him I will be around again in half an hour, and that if he wants to be ready for work in the morning he had better wait and see me to-night."

Then Mr. Jackson went off in search of not only Daniels but his niece. It did not seem likely that as yet anything could have happened to them, but Oro was not a safe place for ladies to wander at midnight without a cavalier; and if Daniels had found any trouble about disposing of his costume unseen there might be trouble enough for him before he got back to the Goat. While the excitement about Binks had quieted down it would not require much to fan it once more into a flame. And if Daniels was after Billy, there was no telling how many, in turn, were after him.

The worst of it was that he was afraid to ask questions, since, outside of Dennis he had no friends in the place whom he cared to trust. He had been going it so thoroughly alone since striking Oro that what he said and did would be more than apt to excite attention.

Back once more at the Casino, and this time in his own person, he looked around, but could see nothing of the parties he was in search of. He listened a little, but there was nothing said in regard to the strangers to show that anyone had noticed their presence, though he heard them spoken of in a general sort of way, as being in the place, and various conjectures made as to the meaning of their visit to the town. He scanned the different dancers, as well as the maskers who sat around the sides of the room; but he was positive that none of the three were there.

Unless Gigson was wide off there must be something wrong; but what the thunder is it? I can account for the man, easy enough. When he saw that his shot had gone home he didn't wait to pick up his knife, but left for what he thought might be cooler quarters. No one seems to have dropped onto him, and he would be just the sort of a fellow to make himself home in some dive until he thinks the racket has blown itself out. But where are the ladies? Minnie knows the ropes of the town well enough, one would think, to keep her from getting into mischief; and has got a voice to yell if she found the street was not safe enough for their promenading. They must have had some other aim in view than a visit to the Casino. Wonder if they could have gone out to consult with Ramah. If Miss Daniels heard that there was such a person here, she looks as though she might be willing to work the advantage for all it was worth. I don't know how the seeress would take a call from me to-night, but it might pay to make it. If I don't learn anything about the young ladies, there are questions I might ask to some advantage."

It did not seem worth while to remain at the Casino any longer. At last accounts Dennis had not turned up, and there was no certainty when he would come, since he had started out with rather a roving commission. Still, there was a possibility that he was at Lanty McGuire's shebang, which was the place where the little Irishman had established himself.

It had accommodations good enough to suit him, since he had a little room over the restaurant all to himself, and could always find a select little party who enjoyed a mild game of draw at the tail end of the evening. As Lanty was a compatriot, and the men who met there were what might be called a picked party, Dennis had made some friends—more, indeed, than Mr. Jackson had cared about accumulating.

As Mr. McGuire's place was in the direction of the cabin of Ramah, the Gent from Jaybird thought it would be as well to take it in as he went along. If Dennis was on hand he could be of material assistance.

The main room of the shebang was entirely empty, save for Lanty, who was dozing in one corner, and to an inquiry he answered that Dennis had not been there since he got his breakfast; and there were some remarks tacked on to the end that showed he was not in altogether a good humor about it; though why it should trouble him was more than Mr. Jackson could understand.

All right, then. I thought it queer I had not

seen him around town to-night, but I guess he is of age. If he comes in you can let him know that I was inquiring for him. I'll take a drink with you for good luck and then be moving. It is late enough for an honest man, who don't want to ruffle the pasteboards or shake a leg at the Casino, to be in bed."

"An' it's roight yez are about that same," said McGuire, as he set out his pet decanter—and Lanty was a judge of good whisky, in spite of the forty-rod benzine that he, for the most part, handed over his bar.

"But there's some ov the spalpeens that will rustle 'round there till they've spent all their coin, and then they'll come down here to make the noight out, an' it's 'Hang it up on the slate, Mr. McGuire,' they'll be afther sayin' till they are full as lords, an' then, it's to the devil wid owld Lanty, an' a chance av they don't troy to wrack the caubeen. A jontleman must have his foon; but it's a hard thing that Lanty McGuire must be helpin' thim all the toime to pay the poiper."

"Oh, I guess you do a pretty good business here the rest of the time—you ought to when you keep whisky like that—and you can afford one dull night out of seven. Good-night. I'll start on my travels before the glow of the dew is over. It went to the right spot, and no mistake."

"Thru phor yez; but there's plinty av the boys want more rid pippet an' aquy fortis in theirn. Av Oi set thet out for the omidhawn it's me thrade that would soon be ruined. It's a blissin' that all av thim aren't the judges that yer honor is. It wad take half me profits av they dbrank out av the other bottle."

The nearest road to the heart of Lanty was by the praise of his better whisky, as Mr. Jackson was well aware, but the Gent from Jaybird thought that he had traveled it sufficiently far for the present. With a laugh and another nod he swung away from the bar, and sauntered out of the door.

He stepped lightly, as he usually did, though the paveless streets would scarcely have given out a sound under his feet. He had no reason for silence, and it was only by chance that, as he passed the end of the building, he cast an upward glance at the little three-pane window which was supposed to light the room set apart for the use of Dennis.

To his surprise he was just in time to see a pair of heels disappearing through the frame, and to hear, a moment later, a loud cry.

CHAPTER XXXII.

SAINTLY SAM BEGINS TO SPEAK.

IT made no difference to Mr. Jackson whether the man whom he had just seen entering the room of Dennis was the little Irishman, or some other man. Quite confident was he that something was wrong, and his chief thought was how to get there with the least delay.

A glance had told him how the man had reached the spot. There was a board lying just below the window, and after climbing up this, the intruder had most likely given it a kick with his foot, lest it might be seen by some passer, and suspicion aroused. Perhaps it was its fall which took Jackson's attention to the spot, though he was not aware that he heard the slight sound.

To put the board into position again, against the side of the house, and scramble up to the window, would take some little time, and the man from Jaybird was anxious to be on the spot at once. And then, there was the risk of the fellow inside turning on him, and making it warm just when it was most inconvenient. Of course, any one caught in such an illegitimate position would not hesitate for explanation, but go at once, even if he had to shoot his way through several Mr. Jacksons.

Fortunately, the Gent from Jaybird knew something about the inside of the house, even if he had never called upon Dennis in his room. There was a side door near to where he stood; and within there was a narrow stairway, almost a ladder, which led to the upper story, if the loft above could be dignified with that title.

Without stopping to try this door he flung himself against it, and it opened without the crash which he was expecting, so that he went stumbling awkwardly forward. Fortunately, he was not harmed, and his lighting place was the stairway of which he was in search. Up this he bounded, threw open the rough little door that he found in front of him and was looking into the room of Dennis.

No need then to look much for the cause of the cry he had heard.

In one corner of the room was a low bed, and on this he could indistinctly see the forms of two struggling men.

Luck was in his favor again, since the little light which came in from the small opening in the wall showed him that the uppermost man was dressed, while the other was as as he had been found in the bed. He was positive that the intruder was not Dennis, and so was his fair game.

The under man was holding his own pretty well for one who had been taken by surprise,

and had such a disadvantage of position. He had his arms locked around the neck of the other, hugging him with what might be a death gripe, while his teeth were sunk deeply into the right shoulder, and he was holding on with a snarl that might have belonged to a wild beast.

"Oh, come off of that, now," cried Mr. Jackson, as he darted into the room, and caught the uppermost man, neck and thigh. "You will only keep the neighbors awake with your riotous proceedings here. Go down below if it is real fun that you are after. We are not up to it here."

It seemed as though he had come just in time. At that instant the grip of the under man broke. He rolled over on his side, like one utterly exhausted, showing how intense the strain had been.

That left the coast clear for Mr. Jackson, and the latter, seeing that no great mischief seemed to have been done, wasted no time in seeking for an explanation, but with one prodigious swing sent the man he had grasped headlong through the window.

He listened for a crash but heard only a curse. Active as a cat the man had lit on his feet, and when Jackson looked out of the window, to see whether there was any likelihood of a fusillade being directed against the house, he saw an individual with a bare head darting away.

There was something familiar about the figure, but his view was so momentary that he did not recognize it. Once assured that there was no more danger from without, he turned to the man on the bed, to take stock of the damage which had been done.

It was not Dennis who lay there. To convince him of that required but a glance.

There was a bandage about this man's head, and his frame was a great deal larger than that of the little Irishman. So much he made out; then there was a light shining through the doorway, and Lanty McGuire was standing there, a lamp in one hand, and a revolver in the other, ready to ask questions as to who was the intruder, and what he was doing to his lodger.

"Howld harrud, ye spalpeen, or Oi'll b'ate the bark off av yel! That is it that ye are doin' here? Hands up, Oi till yez, er yer a did mon!"

"It's all right, Lanty. I just dropped the man you are after out of the window. I thought I had broken every bone in his body, but it seems he skipped, after all, and it's too late to go for him now. He was going in to devour, and this gentleman on the bed was returning his compliments with interest. If I had not arrived when I did they would have eaten each other up entirely. What is it all about, anyhow? Anything missing, my friend?"

He looked down at the figure on the bed, and then started back from the face which was this time turned toward him. It was the face of Saintly Sam, the man whom he thought he had seen lying dead in the Ready John saloon!

"Not this night—some other night! Horace Merton will have to call again if he wants to get ahead of Saintly Sam. He is hard to kill, and what he has he knows how to hold on to. But, thankie, stranger, all ther same. You come in a good time. Ough! I got ther taste ov that man's meat in my mouth, an' whisky won't wash it out. Ten minutes later an' I'd 'a' had dyspepsy, sure."

There was a hat lying on the floor, and as Jackson looked around to note what the room was like, he saw it, and picked it up. Here was something familiar again—he seemed to be in the way of striking unrecognized but familiar things of late. He looked it over thoughtfully while he listened to Sam; and as the Saint closed he thrust his forefinger through a hole in the rim.

"Ah! It seems to me that I thought I heard Sam saying something about a man by the name of Merton. And is it possible that I have not been recognizing my own handiwork? It was a close shave for Colonel Snow—a little closer and it would have bored the head that must have been inside of it. And here's Saintly Sam in the mix about the Alcazor; and it seems that he would sooner be dead and buried than stand the racket he sees is coming off. Don't blame him if they come at him in this shape."

This to himself. Then aloud:

"From the way things looked when I came in, I am afraid, my friend, that it would have been the other fellow who would have had the case of indigestion. He was the top dog in the fight, and though I would have had him laid out before his supper had a chance to settle, he might have got in his work all the same. Lucky thing I happened to glance up at the window and saw his heels. What are you doing here, and what was the man after? Of course, you needn't answer if you don't want to; but it always does me good to know the rights of a case that I have taken a hand in."

"Ther's nothin' 'bout Saintly Sam that he ain't willin' ter tell to a pard ez bez done the white thing. Ther war a party put a hole in me 'tother night, 'round at the Ready John, an' if I hedn't played off on 'em, I reckon they would hev hed me ready fur ther bone-yard,

sure. The leetle Irishman thet hangs out hyer picked me up when I war s'kassly able ter navigate, an' put me in his bunk, ready ter pay Lanty fur all the time he lost a-nursin' me. An' I did need a bit ov that same, an' don't you furgit it."

"Ez fur that chap, I hed only a glimps ov him, but Sam ain't furgittin', dead er alive, an' I knowed him soon ez his heels struck ther floor. He war hyer lookin' fur a leetle paper thet hez a interestin' secret in it, thet I hev kerried till it's most wore out. He ain't jest so sure what's writ on it, but I guess he ain't so wide off when he s'pects thet if it got inter ther right hands, ez I war a-savin' it fur, it would go far to 'rrads hangin' him. Now, you got about all I'm ready ter tell yer, an' ef you'll leave me alone I kin git more good outen sleep than I could outen half a dozen doctors."

"Sleep on, my friend. Unless we could make a bargain on that paper—which I suppose we could not—I do not see that there is anything to be made staying here; and I guess Lanty understands by this time that I am all right. Sorry Dennis is not here, but I can't spend the time in waiting for him. Good-night and pleasant dreams. I'm off now, to try it again."

Lanty knew well enough that Mr. Jackson's presence was according to tariff schedule, and offered no objection to his going; nor did he ask any questions, thinking very correctly that whatever he was to know about the midnight assault could be as well learned from Sam. Down the stairs went Jackson, and out upon the street, all the while keeping a sharp lookout for a man without a hat. It was not likely that he would be lurking near, and yet stranger things had happened in his experience.

"If I keep on heaping up figures in this case, all I will have to do at last will be to add two and two together, and set down the figure four. I got interested some time ago in a woman who seemed to have a mission. About the time I found out that her name was Merton she disappeared, after having been interviewed by a man supposed to be Colonel Snow. Nothing else to do, and I set to work to unravel what seemed to be a mystery, though it was not troubling any one else. Come to Oro, and am told that I am Cool Charlie, and that I killed Ilma's father, at the same time being made to understand that Ilma is searching for the shaft that was once known as the Alcazor. Used to know Daniel, but didn't know he was dead till some years after the funeral. Then, understood it was Indians. Find that the Alcazor is the same as the Dandy Belle, now owned by Binks, and that some one—probably Sweet William—is after me with a sharp stick. Saved by the skin of my teeth I come across Colonel Snow, with Ilma as a prisoner, and he is threatening her. Put a bullet through his hat, and wished it had been through his head. Meet a man who claims to be the brother of old Dan, who also has Daniel's daughter with him. He tries to kill Old Billy. Why are those things thus, unless he wants to take peaceful possession of the mine, which he could not do as long as Billy was in the land of the living? Saintly Sam has some important papers in regard to this man, and comes near being put to his last sleep. He recognizes him as Merton and I chuck him through the window. Meantime Miss Maud is somewhere about town, in company with the young lady who waits on the table at the hotel. Who is she? and what is she after? Maybe Daniels was not the name of the old fellow, but Merton? And, maybe I have struck Ilma, after all, though I was thinking for a time that Miss Maud was the biggest fraud on record. If she is Ilma she is a better hand at disguise than I could have thought. All of which goes to show that I have more reason than ever for going slow. Of course, the warnings that have been given me don't count. Horace Merton may be a scoundrel, and yet Ilma be an honest woman. I shall wait if I can, and see."

"What in the name of wonder brings you here? How lucky!"

The interruption came just as Mr. Jackson was setting out on a train of surmises, and was a double-headed surprise. Horace Daniels had just ranged up to his side. If it was the man he had flung through the window he was certainly none the worse for his tumble, and he was no longer bareheaded. He wore a traveling cap, such as Jackson had not previously seen, and appeared to have no suspicion that the Gent from Jaybird suspected him of being in the least irregular.

"Lucky, indeed, but I confess that I would sooner have found you at the Goat, when I went there half an hour ago to look for you. There is no doubt that your presence at the Casino was noted. You know best how great the danger is."

"Oh, that is all right. It seems to be a regular rule here to down strangers. I do not think that they will down me. Just now, I am tired of asking questions which receive no answer, and am going to where, if reports be true, you can learn the past, present, and future. Did you ever hear of one Ramah? I am on my way to her cabin. What do you say to going along?"

"Good enough, if you have made up your mind to the adventure. You will be just about in time for one of her seances."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE WITCH AND THE WARNING.

"SEEMS to me," thought Mr. Jackson, as he dropped in alongside of Daniels, "that this is one of the coolest villains I ever struck, if I have really made no mistake about him. He don't need a guide around this section of the country half as much as he lets on, and if he keeps it up the way he has begun he will get clean around the circle before daylight. From the way that he conducted the interviews with Binks and Saintly Sam it will be as well to keep a lookout for something desperate when he reaches the cabin of Ramah. And from there to the Dandy Belle will be the next step in order. Oh, he is taking them all in as he goes along."

Daniels did not appear to let his late adventures prey on his mind, nor was he in a hurry to get away from the town. He strolled along, and asked in the most careless way imaginable about what Jackson meant by his reference to the danger from his visit to the Casino.

"Oh, that is all right as long as they do not drop on to who was the big Injun. But if they had been able to get hold of him while their blood was up, and it was not so certain what was going to be the result of a neat little knife-cut that he is supposed to have given Billy Binks, I imagine he would have stretched hemp as soon as they could have found a place to tie the rope. Oro is mighty quick on the trigger when she finds that a stranger has been doing something which is not exactly square."

"Willing to make a heap sight of fuss about one poor old fool, that they would see starve to death without a wink. Hurt bad, was he?"

"Not as bad as he would have been if the knife had gone a trifle further to one side. The intention was good enough, but one can't always put a knife where he wants it when he pitches it in a crowd. He may be dead by morning; but it is more likely that he will be around all right in a week or so."

"A week! Humph! That is getting off so well that he ought not to grumble. By the way, I notice that there is a rather handsome young lady employed at the hotel. Looks as though she might be above her business. Wonder how she came to get there. No relative of Gigson's, is she?"

"Not that I know of. Never asked him, though. I have generally found the female sex bad medicine for me, and so let them severely alone. I suppose that Japhet would know all about her, but I never asked him."

"I have, but he didn't have much to say. Thought if she was as much a lady as she looks that perhaps Maud could cultivate her a little, to some advantage. A popular young lady in Oro might be able to pick up some points that would not otherwise be come at. I must speak to Maud in the morning."

There was an elegant chance right here to tell Daniels that the cultivation had already begun; and that it had gone so far that the two ladies appeared to have run off with each other. But in the absence of any certainty that something untoward had happened, and a feeling that they would prefer to keep the knowledge of their escapade to themselves, Mr. Jackson said nothing.

"I was not certain; but at one time I thought I saw the young lady at the Casino. In fact, there were two of her, dressed like nuns, and I could not tell 't'other from which. Do you know of any one in Oro who resembles her in figure and height, to say nothing of having the same walk?"

"No one, unless it might be your niece."

"Whew! That is an idea. Strange I never thought of that. Hope they will not have headed us off at Ramah's. She knows the way, and may have taken the same notion to consult the seeress. Better hustle along if we don't want to find her time occupied ahead of us."

Nothing troubled Mr. Daniels greatly; and even this suggestion seemed to be more after the manner of a joke than of serious earnest, though they went along for some distance in silence. After a little he broke ground again.

"By the way, who was it thought they had discovered the mare's nest? If anybody deserved to get the credit of the knife work it should have been Sweet William; but it seems some one thought differently. I may owe him one yet."

"Oh, it was a stranger to Oro, at least, as far as I could judge. He was a man with his arm in a sling, who said that he answered to the handle of Happy Jack. Where he came from I did not think to inquire; a drifter, I should judge, here to-night and gone to-morrow. If he had intended to remain he might not have been so free with his information."

This time Daniels had heard something to interest him, if his actions were any sign. At the mention of the name of Happy Jack he gave a whistle of surprise, and when Jackson was done, asked for a description of the man in a way that showed he thought it a matter of some importance.

Mr. Jackson had taken a fairly close observation of the man, and had had no difficulty in drawing a word picture that could be recognized. Daniels listened in silence, asked no more questions, but from that time on looked occasionally over his shoulder with a glance that had more than a trace of apprehension in it, if the Gent from Jaybird was not greatly mistaken. It struck him that he had found the vulnerable point in the armor of imperturbable Horace Daniels.

"There is something he is afraid of; if I wait I will find out what it is," thought Mr. Jackson. "If I see anything more of the man with his arm in a sling, I had better see to it that I am standing out of range. Sooner than miss, I think he would be willing to pot us both, if I make no mistake in reading his features. Sooner or later I will know what it means, and meantime, perhaps I can guess."

As they approached the cabin of Ramah, it could be seen that a light twinkled there, and from that judged they would find her ready for business, which was something they had by no means been sure of. More than one visitor had been denied admittance, and sent away to wait for a more propitious season. When Ramah was in a silent mood, it made no difference how long a visitor knocked; she gave no sign.

"She is decidedly independent, and if we want to get the worth of our money, we will have to humor her whims," advised Jackson, at the last moment.

"One at a time is the only way she has been willing to receive her visitors, and as I have the less interest, you had better have the advance. Give her her own way and she will tell you a heap, and perhaps show you some strange things. She did me."

For answer, Daniels stepped upon the porch, and raised his knuckles to apply them to the door.

As usual, when Ramah was ready for a visitor, the door swung open as if of its own accord, and the same voice which Jackson had heard there once before, ordered:

"Step forward together. You are working for the same end and interest, and should have no secrets from each other. Better would it have been if you had come sooner, though it may not yet be too late."

Jackson laid his hand warningly on the shoulder of the other man, since he was afraid he might say something which would give offense, and together the two stepped over the threshold.

The room into which they came was so dark that the air was black, when the door closed behind them of its own accord.

"Horace Merton, you are welcome," said the same voice.

"The stars told me that you would come, sooner or later. What is it that you would learn? Shall I reopen the past, spread before you the present, or reveal the secrets of the future? To you the fates are kind, and grant the choice, though I would warn you not to ask too much."

"If they are friendly, let them speak for themselves. They know better than I what would be for my profit. If they need urging, I can ask a question or two to start things in the right train."

"No need to do that, since it can be no secret what it is that you want first and most of all. Has the treasure that was mined by old Dan Daniels ever been found? and if not, is it safe for you to make the search for it? Then, where is it to be found? You think that you have been able to locate the old Alcazar shaft, but you are not sure. Go on, and fear not. The treasure lies yet in the lower shaft, and is ready for your taking. But waste no time about it. Others have learned the secret, and in another day it may be too late."

"Ha, ha! This beats the Jews! For a proper consideration I suppose you would be willing to guide me to it."

"The man at your side can find it; and if he has forgotten, let him seek for the Dandy Belle. No trouble will there be to find that."

"So, he has been playing off on me, all the time. I suspected as much, but it makes no great difference. To find it too soon would cheapen his labor. Now, tell me, if you can, who killed Daniel, and I will say that you are a true witch. But, beware how you make a wild guess! It will be more than apt to mean blood."

"I answer that not myself; look and see if you recognize the picture. If it is on a trail of vengeance you have come to Oro, best let the treasure go. You cannot have both. And, beware of the avengers! If I mistake not, they are on the track."

Daniels would have made some answer, but, at that moment a single spot of light appeared in the darkness, growing rapidly, and out of the center of it a face as rapidly resolving itself.

"Look, and see for yourself if that looks like the face of Cool Charlie. If not, your search will have to begin again."

"What infernal jugglery is that?" the man fairly shouted.

"By the heavens above us, that face is my own!"

At the sound of his voice the picture suddenly

disappeared, and all was again dark and silent.

"There is more in this than fate and the stars," said Daniels, after a little interval, and speaking in a voice which told strongly of suppressed passion.

"Woman, who are you? With such secrets to your hand it is a toss-up whether you ought to live. If I do not slay you here it is because it might seem a proof that I was capable of the foul crime with which you have just charged me."

"Fool! I am Ramah, the sorceress! and it lies not in your power to slay me until my hour has come. And then, I am ready to die—as well at your hands as in any other way. I answer you no more questions, but the stars tell me that your niece is at the Dandy Belle Mine, and in some danger. What matters that to you, though? When she is dead there will be no more trouble in your mind as to how you are to keep your share of the treasure. Go now, and come not back until Dan Daniels is avenged!"

"Go I will; but beware if you have enticed that girl into danger! She can well take care of herself in the open field, but at the mine, who knows what may happen? Jackson, come on. Show me the Dandy Belle now and we will call it quits for what you might have done and did not do."

"All right, my friend. The Dandy Belle it is. I begin to think that they did not down Old Billy for nothing. Somebody is going to jump that claim before morning, and why might it not as well be us?"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE DANDY BELLE HAS VISITORS.

As the two men went along it was Mr. Jackson who was the more inclined to conversation. From the moment they left the cabin of Ramah, Daniels was silent save when spoken to, though he did not refuse to answer when addressed.

"Who is that woman?" asked the Gent from Jaybird, when he found that his companion was not disposed to make any allusion to what had just happened. "It seems strange that so little is known of her in Oro, and that she knows so much. And she bled me lively enough when I was asking questions, but I notice that she never said money to you once."

"I suspect that she knows more about us than she does of the rest of the town; and if there was not such a suggestion of flesh and blood in her voice I should say that she is not a woman at all, but a ghost. Strange how the dead will come to life! She knew enough to keep in the shadow."

"Appears to me that she has changed her mind. If that was the picture of the party who killed Dan Daniels it lets Cool Charlie out altogether. I heard what you said on the subject; but unless there is something back of it all that I can't understand you were wide off as to what she meant. I never could suppose that picture looked like you."

"It is not the picture of the man who killed brother Daniel; to that I will swear; but all the same it is meant for mine. There were certain ear marks about it which an outsider could not notice, but which I understand the meaning of. If there was more time I would never leave things there in that shape. But the Dandy Belle, first of all. To-morrow will be time enough to seek the witch again. I must know if she really understands."

"And you think it the truth she has told us about your niece?"

"As likely as not. If not, what difference? Our eyes will have the less to look for. Can we reach this mine on foot; and will we be apt to meet many persons on the way?"

"It will be a fairish tramp; but not beyond our strength, or that of a woman. And the tramp will be apt to be lonesome enough unless we happen to stumble across the other party she spoke of. The developments of late have been on the other side of the town; and when Billy bought that claim he might have had a dozen abandoned ones with as good a showing if he had chosen to take them. There was no other man who would have had the cheek to sell to the old fellow; but Abel Kain never stopped on the way to make an honest dollar. And he can always afford the salt it takes to save himself. I kicked for Binks but the fool knew what he was about, I reckon, for he wouldn't have it. And now, Abel Kain will kick himself all over the district if it turns out that there is wealth in the claim."

"Don't fret yourself about Abel Kain. I know very little about him; but I should judge that he knows how to make himself even. If anything turns up he will try to be on the carpet; and I shouldn't wonder if we were to find him there now. Pity you didn't tell the truth this morning, and shame the devil."

"Yes, and have Kain light right down on us, the first move we made. I knew something better than that. My man will be on the ground to keep track of what is going on. When I was sure that you were the right man, and had found out who else has an eye on the spot, I would have taken you around to the mine by the back road, and we could have looked things

up at our leisure. But it was no more than fair to give Billy a show, and I am looking out for his interests, as well as yours and mine, when I take you there to-night. Don't you go to deceiving yourself with the idea that this will be a little picnic, all sweet-cakes and lemonade. If there is not some powder burned before morning, it will be because some other party knuckles down. I have been letting things drift, but before we get through I will know as much about them as any one."

And having given his warning, Mr. Jackson, finding that he was not likely to get much information from Daniels, remained silent.

He had made up his mind that the man he was guiding was wiser than he seemed, and that it was not so much foolhardy ignorance as a courage that relied on self which led him to take this midnight journey with a man whom it was scarcely bad faith to doubt.

When they stood on the spot from which Mr. Jackson and Dennis had taken their view of the Dandy Belle and its surroundings, there was a brief halt.

All below was silence and darkness. If there was any one about, the fact could not be made out without a closer inspection. Side by side they descended the incline until they came to the mouth of the old shaft.

Here, for the first time, Daniels appeared to hesitate.

"Jackson, there is something queer about the way you are mixed up in this affair, and I may as well say that I am not sure whether you can be trusted. I can't very well do without you at this late hour of the game, and I don't want to offend a man of your caliber by saying that I am watching you, and at the first crooked move will bore you through. How is it? Fair and square, are you going to stay with me till the work of the night is over, or are you going to work for somebody else, whether that body will be Mr. Jackson, or a name that has yet to come to the front? I am paying you, and I want a square deal; or to know that I am to expect marked cards, trimmed for crooked business."

"I'll tell you the honest truth," responded the Gent from Jaybird. "It is not your game I am backing as much as that of your niece. A woman comes first with me. I confess she has puzzled me somewhat, but I believe she is the genuine article. As long as your interests and hers run in the same line you will find me with you. If I ever want to draw out, I will give you full and due notice, so that you will not be able to say that I have been acting a treacherous part. It is possible we will find her below. Ramah said we would, and in some danger. I expect, no matter what the odds may be, we will rescue her in the end, but there is no need to be in a rush about it. As long as she is coming to no immediate harm, we may as well see what is going on, and if you attempt to crowd matters before I give the word, you may have to play a lone hand. I am running things more or less, and have as much curiosity as the next."

"Be as curious as you like, so it is in our interests. You will find that I mean business all the time, and that Maud will stay with me. Our family is small, but select, and our motto has always been, one for all and all for one. I will trust you to go with me through the night. Lead on."

"With the reservation I have openly made you may trust me. Come on."

Then the two men dropped the subject, each with the thought, and Horace Daniels with more than the thought, that before the sun dawned they might be at revolver-ends with each other.

The rope by which Mr. Jackson had descended at his former visit hung as it had then done, and all was as silent as before.

"If there is any one there, we will not need a light for the present," whispered Mr. Jackson. "If there is not, we can procure one in good time. Better, perhaps, to let me go first, as I know the ways of the shaft. Then I can haul up the box to you, and you can come down. Hold on to the string, in case there should be any slips; but I think I can do the most of the work for you."

Daniels gave a silent consent to the arrangement, and watched Mr. Jackson closely while he drew up the rope, and prepared to lower himself. The Gent from Jaybird was taking double risks without a question. He was going to face what there might be below in the darkness, and if Horace Daniels wanted to cut the rope when he was fairly started on the downward journey, there would be nothing to prevent him.

But for the present Mr. Jackson was safe from the ex-outlaw, who still had need of him. He reached the level all right, and after looking and listening to make sure that no one was near, raised the box for his companion to make the descent.

"Looks as though we were alone here," he whispered, as Daniels stepped to the ground.

"But it won't do to be too sure. Ramah said we would find other visitors, and unless they have come and gone, they are either here or will be before long. If they are still on the outside, and your niece is with them, I suppose you hardly want to make a fight. They must know something about the Dandy Belle that wasn't

thought of by Abel Kain when he sold out; and it would be as well to see what it is."

"Right you are. If we can keep our own presence a secret, and get to where we can see and hear, I ask nothing better. It will take a pretty large gang to oust us from our rights if we are once within the lines. And if Maud comes, I am not afraid to trust her. Whatever else she may do, she will not go back on one of the same blood."

"Unless she took it into her head to think that the treachery was beginning with you."

"That would be a different matter, and I would not blame her. But the danger of that is slight. Which way now?"

"Hist! I think I hear the sound of footsteps. This way! Put your hand on my arm, and follow closely. There is no danger in the way, unless we stumble across the intruders before we are ready for them."

Daniels had ears that were almost as sharp as those of Mr. Jackson. When he listened, turning his head in the direction indicated by the pressure of the hand of his guide, he could distinguish quite plainly the soft tread of muffled footsteps.

"There is a recess in the rock that will conceal us, and yet give a chance to watch, if we can reach it in time. I think I know the spot at which they are aiming—if they know as much about things as Ramah would have us believe."

"Not so sure that I did not betray it myself," he added in an undertone meant only for his own ears, and which may have escaped those of the other, sharp as they were.

It was rather a ticklish piece of business, groping their way in the dark, without being certain how near the others were. They knew well enough that in an affair like this, where both parties were intruders, there would be little time lost in explanation, should they happen to come suddenly together. Whoever it might be that was about to jump the Dandy Belle would shoot first, and shout for a truce when the other side was down.

Yet Jackson knew the way well enough, and he and Daniels slipped into the recess just when a glow near by told them that they were going to have neighbors.

"Keep silent," whispered Jackson, "until we can see what they are after. There is no use to open the ball till we must move. Then we can have the advantage of a surprise; and I guess will be good for a dozen. If Miss Maud is there we must see that she is not in the range of stray bullets. Her safety comes first of all."

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE BONES IN THE BOX.

"CARELESS in us not to look after the other shaft," said a voice that was evidently disguised, but which sounded familiar, for all that.

"One of you go forward and see that no one comes in on us from that direction."

A little squad of men came along the drift, and in their midst walked a woman in the garb of a nun. Her veil almost concealed her face, which was masked as well; but two watchers could well believe that it was Maud after what they had seen and heard.

"All right, boss," answered a voice.

"There is not much danger of the man of the house being at home to-night, and I don't guess that there will be any one else wanting to snoop around hyer, but we'll shin up the rope if we can get at it, an' if we can't there's nothing the matter with keeping a lookout below. Guess there can't any one get down without me finding it out. Shall I shoot if I see any one coming?"

"Better shoot first, but not to hit; and then tell them to hold on. I will be with you in a minute. If this thing turns out as we expect we will hold on tooth and nail till we get done with the drift, or come to some arrangement with Billy. If we should find out that it was a false alarm, then the whole world can come, and welcome."

The sentinel went his way, brushing so near to the two men crouching to one side of the drift that he could almost have touched their clothing. He had a drawn revolver in his hand, and in spite of his orders looked like an unhealthy man to meet suddenly.

Of course, as this man went by, the two cowered back. When he had passed on they leaned forward once more, watching the proceedings with a double interest. Did these men know the mystery of the lower drift; and how did it come that Maud was with them, a willing companion?

"And this, you say, is the shaft dug by the hands of my father?" asked Maud, as the party halted.

"So we have reason to believe. As far as you can see there is nothing to distinguish it from any other hole in the ground that a miner has made and left. I have been through it a dozen times without seeing that there was anything here but a lost lead—if lead there ever was. If we find anything else—and I believe that we will—it is in consequence of discoveries but lately made, and of which I heard for the first time this morning."

Then he turned to the man who stood beside him:

"There is danger in delay. If there is any-

thing in what you told me, it is time that we had the proof. To work. This, you say, is the spot."

"It war right about hyer, boss. Hyer's the mark I made on the wall, an' right hyer—"

First he held the lantern to the wall, and showed where some one had dug into the rock with a sharp tool; then, he knelt on the rock at their feet and pointed with his finger:

"Right hyer war whar he war proddin' with his knife. I dunno how the thing are raised; but you kin bet yer bottom dollar thet thar are a way, an' ther sharp knows it. An' ef he arn't ther man we knowed once ez Cool Charlie, w'ot never made a mistake, then you kin say thet I'm a fraud, an' ther ground hyer ain't holler."

"All right, then, if you are certain of the place. Stand aside. We can try the pick on it, and if it opens, as I think it will, we will be pretty sure that we have fathomed the mystery of the Alcazor. Once in the lower drift and the rest will be plain sailing. Do you not so believe?"

The latter part of this was addressed to Maud, who stood leaning over, and staring at the rock in the floor with breathless eagerness.

"Yes, yes! Go on! His letters said that the treasure would be hidden at the end of the lower drift, and if anything should happen to him, we would find an explanation before we reached it."

Maud spoke without a thought that she might be revealing more than in cooler moments she would care to have her companions know. If they heard her they did not notice, since the leader was every whit as much excited as the young lady. He made no answer, but carefully dropped the pick of which he had spoken on the crevice at one end of the stone, the stroke being guided by the light of the lantern which Sweet William held over the spot.

The result was that the point of the tool sunk deeper, and with more ease, than they had dreamed it would. It seemed to be firmly fixed in its place, and to offer all the leverage they could hope for. A twist and a turn of the wrist and the stone appeared to move.

"Come nearer," said the man in the mask, looking up.

"It is but right that you should open the way. It seems to yield readily to the hand, and your strength is probably sufficient to force it from the spot where, perhaps, it was bedded by your father's hands."

Trembling with excitement Maud placed her hand upon the handle of the pick, and cast a downward glance to assure herself of her footing. There was more strength in her arms than this man gave her credit for, and she did not intend that her effort should fail.

"One minute, if you please."

The words were spoken in a laughing, everyday tone, but at their end came the sharp click of a risen hammer, and when the man in the mask wheeled suddenly around he was looking into the barrel of a leveled revolver, while a kindred weapon was trained upon Sweet William.

"As you are, gentlemen, or I pull trigger, and you both go over the range. I come as a friend; but, for fear you may misunderstand me before an explanation can be given, I am prepared to protect myself. Keep that lamp trimmed and a-burning, my friend, or you will never know what hurt you."

The sharp order came just in time, for Sweet William had made up his mind to give the lantern a toss, and take his chances in the dark. He had doubts about the friendliness of the intruder, and saw, what the rest did not, that the gent from Jaybird was standing a yard or two further off, with his hands at his sides to be sure, but with a look of very deep interest on his face as he turned his eyes toward the woman who held the pick.

"We stand as we are for a moment, so that you can give an account of yourself; but after that, unless it is a good one, it will be war to the knife. What means this intrusion?"

"That is not hard to explain, and if I was sure that you would not make a fool of yourself trying to get in a snap shot before you knew what you were driving at I could do it with a good deal more comfort to both of us. If I am not mistaken, you are Abel Kain, and the young lady yonder is Maud Daniels, my niece. Why you should have chosen to trust her and not me is the mystery which is troubling my brain at the present moment. She can and will tell you that in this matter we are acting as one, and that whatever might have been your success in my absence it would have been shared by me, all the same. Come down to business, Mr. Kain. Have done with this mummery, and understand that whatever may be your find you are dealing with a man who can protect his rights; and not with a woman, whom you have probably underrated after all."

"I am Abel Kain, at your service; and this is the daughter of the Daniel Daniels who once owned this mine. But that she is your niece, or that you are aught but a fraud and a schemer, I deny. With the true heir to all that Dan Daniels may have left under my eyes for the last month, the secret of her quest known to me as it was only known to one other, do you think I

could be for a moment fooled by your professions, or taken in by the pretty face you had chosen to drag in as your accomplice? There can only be war between us, but it is as well before it begins that you should know what Oro will think about you, and what it is that I can tell its people when the fight begins."

"There will be no fight between us, my friend. When you try to begin that you will die before you get a hammer back. You will never know what a wide mistake you have made until you get over the range—and by that time the knowledge can do you no good. How is it, Maud? Can you see the mistake that this man has somehow made in dealing with you; and do you feel duly complimented by the opinion he has formed of us? Answer freely, for I have the whip hand if he thinks of cutting up rusty. Throw off your veil and mask, and let him see your face as it is. Perhaps he will be more reasonable if he understands the situation more completely."

The advent of Daniels had been no great surprise to the young lady, and she stood leaning on the handle of the pick, waiting to see how the fracas would end. She had known all along that there had been some mistake; and now she believed that she knew what it was. She threw back the veil, lifted the mask, and turned her face full upon Abel Kain.

He looked at her eagerly, though his gaze rested on her countenance but an instant. There was no mistaking the features, and at the bewilderment shown by Kain the colonel laughed once more, and heartily.

"Slightly mixed, were you not? What do you think of my accomplice now? Is it too late to bargain with you to do the square thing? Give me your word and I am willing yet to take you in on the ground floor. If not, I shall have to request you to hold up your hands while I make some little arrangements toward securing for us an uninterrupted opportunity for investigation. Speak quick, for the night is passing."

"Have it your own way, and count me out. I am as curious as you are to see how this will all end, but since I see that I am caught in my own trap I will have nothing more to do with it. If it is my word that you want, you have got it. Now, go on with the search."

"All right. I'll trust you that far; though if Miss Minnie, of the Golden Goat, was in sight I am afraid that I would have to have some better guarantee if I did not want to have you kicking over the traces. It looks as though she might be the fraud, after all. Curious how one finds out things if he always waits a little."

"No fraud is she, but a true woman. I chose to help her, but the effort was a failure, and the loss is hers. Under the muzzle of your revolver, and with such a man as Mr. Jackson behind you, all I can do is to throw up my hands and say, go ahead. There is nothing more foolish than a useless fight. Principle never does a man any good when he is dead."

"Oh, I can trust you, safely enough, after that. Step to one side, please, while Maud sees what is under that stone. I begin to think, myself, that we are nearing the end of the trail."

Kain stepped to one side as he was bidden.

"Now go on, my dear. We seem bound to succeed in spite of ourselves."

This time, with a vigorous motion Maud leaned heavily on the handle of the pick, and one side of the stone began to raise. The slab had no great thickness, after all.

"Look out!" said Daniels, and he caught the stone as it seemed about to slip, and without an effort laid it over on the floor.

"Now look, my dear, and see if there is anything there which looks as though our researches are to be rewarded."

As he spoke he took the lantern from the hand of Sweet William, and holding it over the aperture, allowed Maud to take a downward glance.

She looked, and then started back with a scream, while an answering curse dropped from the lips of her uncle.

Under where the slab had been there appeared a box; and in that box there was a skeleton. The bones were carelessly thrown together, and on the top of them lay a grinning skull.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE MYSTERY OF THE LOWER DRIFT.

"AH," said Abel Kain, coldly, and turning to Sweet William.

"You said that you had found a treasure, but it seems that it was only a tomb. If that is all that your revelation amounted to it is as well that I failed. The young lady, no doubt, is looking at the bones of her father."

"Another word like that and I will take you in hand myself," said Mr. Jackson, stepping forward and dropping his hand upon the arm of Kain in a not very gentle way. "If you have no respect for a lady who has just received such a shock, I will see if you cannot be taught to respect me. And when I give the lesson it stays right by you. You understand?"

The reproof was sharp, but it was well merited. Kain cowered back a little. Had it not been for the presence of the man from Jaybird

he might have taken advantage of the opportunity. Horace Daniels seemed to be as strongly affected as his niece.

"Brace up, you two," Jackson added, speaking to Maud and her uncle, though still keeping his gaze fixed on Kain and Sweet William.

"That box is only a blind. The real shaft lies below; and those bones never belonged to Dan Daniels. Watch these men, who are ready to rend you while your backs are turned, and I will lay the skeleton aside, so that you can find the lower drift."

Daniels turned at the words, once more himself.

"Right you are. The forgetfulness was but temporary, though a man can be pardoned for showing some emotion when he sees what, for a moment, he believes to be the remains of his brother. Of course they were placed there to hide what must be beyond. Do not look at them, Maud, for I will swear that they were never the bones of poor Dan."

"The men that place things no doubt can show how they are to be put aside," remarked Kain, somewhat recovered, and speaking with a sneer.

"Whoever the bones belonged to, they seem to have been put there by the man who took them away. You wanted to know, to-day, something about Cool Charlie. You had better ask the gentleman himself. He seems to stand before you."

"Time enough to speak about Cool Charlie when we get to the other end of the drift. The road is open, and, you man with the lantern, go ahead!"

Sweet William was not satisfied with the arrangement, but, as the pistol of Mr. Jackson covered him, he hardly thought it was safe to hesitate. If the Gent from Jaybird knew who placed him in the abandoned shaft there would be an open account that he might be only too glad to take the opportunity to settle.

"That's all right for you, boss; but 'pears ter me thet ef ther bad air katches me an' ther lantern you'll be left in ther dark."

"There is something in that, Sweet William. We don't want to lose you till that little trouble between you and Binks is explained and straightened out. We will test the matter a little before we put you into such danger. Of course, we could find another man as rough and as tough as you are by a little searching; but to lose the light would be a serious matter. Here! How does that suit you? All seems to be right down there."

Mr. Jackson had lighted a torch, made from a hastily-twisted bit of paper. It gave a flare when cast into the opening; and dropping some ten or fifteen feet it burned out fairly on the floor below. The ventilation might be none of the best, but what air there was was pure enough for all practical purposes.

"Now then, as you observe, there are steps leading down, and you will tread them as carefully as though Mr. Daniels was not at your back, with a revolver in elegant working order, ready to go off on the slightest provocation."

Sweet William started without hesitation, but Daniels drew back.

"Go on, you two. Some one must stay here to see that there is not a surprise from the rear. Abel Kain throws up his hands entirely too gracefully to suit my idea of the man. Maud will be safe under your care; and it is but right that she should have the chance to discover what is hidden at the other end of the drift. Your company is as good as mine, and it may be that you are the better able to look after your escort. I can warn them that they don't pass here again until you two are safe out of the drift. After that we can swear them in and let them go."

"Any way at all," said Mr. Jackson, as he turned toward Maud.

She had somewhat recovered from the shock received at the sight of the skeleton which she at first believed to be that of her father; but she still looked warily at the man from Jaybird as though to catch any involuntary betrayal on his countenance, and her hand was in her bosom, resting on a weapon that she knew how to use as well as the rest of them. She had learned a great deal this night; and she began to think that she would be made certain of something more.

She nodded to Mr. Jackson, as his gaze fell upon her, and the two followed after Abel Kain and his man, who were already cautiously beginning the descent.

Horace Merton—or Daniels as he had of late been calling himself—waited until the party had not only reached the floor below but had started on their journey along the drift. Then he coolly turned over the rock which had closed the opening, fitted it to its place, wedging it with the pick, seated himself upon it, and began to consider the situation.

"With all the advantages of position, and a possible fortune in the distance, if it wasn't for the witch I am not so sure that any of them would ever come out of here alive. There is that man outside, to be sure, but it would be an easy matter to settle with him; and if I thought best I could save Ilma out of the general wreck. Ilma! Is she Ilma? I begin to

doubt that I was as shrewd as I thought, and if she is really Lorrimer, she might as well die. How easy it would be to shake hands with them over the muzzle of a revolver as they came up the stairway, and leave bones below as well as bones above. Really, while I am debating the subject I think it would be as well to leave them there and go out and prospect."

A listener could hardly have told whether he spoke in jest or earnest as he sat there in darkness, muttering to himself; when he went cautiously along the drift, toward the end by which he and Mr. Jackson entered, it would have looked as though there might be very serious intention in his actions. There was no love in his heart for Mr. Jackson; and he was by no means certain that Kain did not know more than he allowed to appear on the surface. Sweet William was only a bit of machinery which could be removed without much trouble, and would have to go if the others went.

The little party below knew nothing of this, as they followed the course of the drift, Kain and Sweet William in the advance.

"Looks as though there had been some work done here not so long since," whispered Jackson to the woman at his elbow.

"The drift was made long enough ago; but these rocks have but lately been taken from some place not far ahead. They choke up the way, which was none too broad before. Look out for treachery. If it were not for the warning your uncle gave them I would not be surprised to see the light go out, and know that they were dropping behind the rocks, where their chances would be better than ours. We cannot be far from the end, but till we reach it keep a sharp lookout. I have no fear for myself you understand, but I want you keep out of danger."

The men in advance halted, and Sweet William held up his lantern while all looked around.

Maud could see more plainly the truth of what Mr. Jackson had just been saying. Work had been done here, lately.

"The ore would pay for reduction," said Jackson, "but there is not a bonanza in it. I suspect that there was a rich streak that has been skimmed out. What is that yonder, in the corner?"

The drift came to an abrupt ending, and against the end stood crossed a pick and a crowbar. In front of them was a small box.

It was not large enough nor strong enough to look like the receptacle of any great treasure, but they stood around it as though they expected it to contain a revelation.

"Hyer's ther end ov ther level, an' hyer's yer box. You kin see fur yerself wot's in it. It's none ov my funeral."

Sweet William held the lantern over the box, and the woman threw herself beside it, raising the lid with an eager hand.

It was empty save for a small package, and a sheet of paper folded in the form of a letter. The package she hardly noticed; but she unfolded the letter with anxious haste, and bent over toward the lantern. On it were traced some characters, written in a hand with which she was familiar enough.

"TO MY DAUGHTER:—

"For reasons which you will better understand when you have seen the papers left in the hands of a man I can trust, and which you may have already perused, I did not care to write too openly or too freely, nor to allow the whereabouts of your wealth known until you have had time to digest the facts connected with its ownership. I leave here a sample of the almost virgin gold taken from this lower drift. At the first it was buried here, but I have since recovered it, and you will find it deposited—or its value—to your credit in the Bank of California. Ask for it under your true name, and you will find under what circumstances it can be drawn, and how.

"DANIEL DANIELS,

"Owner of the Alcazor."

"So ends that part of the search," said the woman, in a solemn tone.

"Our business here is finished. Let the poor wretch who bought the mine have it. I will have nothing to do with it save to see that his rights are protected. The papers of which he speaks must be those in the hands of Saintly Sam—if indeed he is living to hold them. Until they are found, the question of who killed my father must remain unsettled. Was it to hide the secret forever that he was slain? Poor fellow, if he has been true to the death, no matter how rough the outside may have seemed, he had a heart of gold, and his death shall be amply avenged!"

"He is not so very dead, unless he hopped the twig within the last few hours," said Mr. Jackson, who was listening with more interest than he showed.

"There was a gentleman who seemed to have an interest in sending him out of the land of the living, and he had his fingers on his throat, but I came in time. If you want him—" sinking his voice to a whisper, so that it could not be heard by the others—"you can look for him at Lanty McGuire's; but I would advise you to tell no one of your intentions when you set out to visit him."

She looked at him sharply as she said:

"Perhaps you would like to accompany me when I go?"

"Then, as well as at all times," he responded, gallantly; and she smiled drearily as she turned away once more, and with the paper clasped in her hand motioned toward the upper world.

The distance was not great, and before many moments had elapsed the four were back at their starting point.

"All right, up there?" shouted Mr. Jackson at the foot of the stairway.

There was no answer, and it even seemed to him that his voice came hollowly back in an echo that said it could go no further.

"Keep your eye on the man with the lantern. If he attempts to drop it, salt him. You have your revolver at your hand; draw it, and keep him covered."

Then he ran lightly up the stairs and tried the stone trap. As he expected, it was closed, and a pressure as strong as he could throw upon it failed to cause it to move.

"I don't want to needlessly alarm you," he said, returning, "but that delectable uncle of yours has closed the door and gone away prospecting. If he forgets to come back we will be in no end of a bad mix."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"NOT YOUR SAY-SO, PARD."

HORACE MERTON, otherwise Daniels, lately known as Colonel Snow, was by no means certain what his course was going to be. Alone with himself there was a weakness about his resolves that he would not have allowed had there been any one present to note the fact. Although he knew as little of fear as most men, he was beginning to think that it was time that Mr. Jackson was out of the way if he wanted to secure his own safety. And somehow, there was a flavor of the past about Abel Kain that he did not entirely fancy. If he was not mistaken he had betrayed himself, and Kain knew him as the outlaw whom he had thought might be forgotten. If, to crown all, he had been mistaken when he thought he had penetrated the disguise of the captive he had had taken from the coach to the Gulch, there had been such a mess made of things that he really wanted to "draw a moist pen slick through, and start 'fresh."

This was the substance of his thoughts as he climbed the rope which he found as Jackson and he had left it. As the sentinel would not think of danger from below, he had no doubt but that he could effect his capture without noise or difficulty. When he reached the top of the shaft he was not at all alarmed to find the man leaning over the opening, who saluted him as he came with the questions:

"What's wrong, now? Where are the rest?"

"Hist! Keep cool!" responded the climber, imitating the voice of Sweet William, as near as he was able.

"All right hyer, but ther boss sent me up ter tell yer sum'thin' he couldn't say afore the others, an' he didn't want it spoke loud hyer, either."

He sprang out of the shaft as the sentinel leaned nearer, and struck out from the shoulder with a force there was no resisting. The man dropped to the stroke, and he had everything now in his own hands.

At least, so he thought, as he leaned over to bind the hands of the insensible man; nor did he note that there was a man staggering slowly down the hillside, with one hand pressed upon his side, and a revolver clutched in the other.

"It may have been chance that brought that ruffian in my path," this man was muttering, "but it was no chance that flung that knife at my heart when I was holding my own. Someone will be at the shaft to-night, and though it may not be worth the holding, the Dandy Belle is still mine."

When Horace Merton had bound the prisoner to his satisfaction, and raised once more to his feet, he found himself face to face with Billy Binks.

"You!" exclaimed Binks, as he hastily threw his revolver forward, and covered the man in front of him.

"Yes, I!" retorted Merton, as with a motion every bit as deft he whipped out his own pistol and brought it to bear on the other.

"Go slow, old man! Your hammer is not back, and when I hear the click mine comes down, and you are booked down the flume, for good."

"If not?"

"Then there may be a chance for a few words between us. There are some things that need explaining, and I would like a chance to tell you the latest edition of the truth before you die."

"Ha, ha! Speak away. I am so glad to meet you that I am willing to listen if you will give me a slight chance to speak when you are done. If you can't, I can pull at the flash, and we will be planted under the daisies together. I carry a self-acting tool and when my finger crooks you'll never hear the click you are waiting for. Oh, I have been waiting for this hour,

and yet dreading it. But for the murder that was in your heart a few short hours ago it might never have come, in spite of this last fraud, more barefaced than them all."

"Ho, ho! I can laugh too, don't you see? I think I understand you; and if I do you never were further off in your life. Fraud! Ha, ha! Tell me what it is that you will believe me on and I will swear to you till hades burns green that the woman who came to Oro with me between two days is the woman I have called her. She is the daughter of the man known here as Dan Daniels, and her true name is Ilma Merton. She was under my wing, and we were to unearth the mystery of what became of the pockets in the Alcazor, and who shut off the wind of the man who worked them. Then, we were going to enjoy wealth and vengeance together."

"Take care! Take care, you fiend! Don't put it too strong, or I cannot wait. At such a lie as that my finger would tighten of its own accord."

"Better not. We would only drop together; and if we did it is a sure thing that the tomb of the said Ilma would forever remain unmarked. At present she is shut up behind a pretty solid wall of rock, and there lives no one else who would know the way to open it, or think of looking for it before it would be too late. We were here together, and when you made your appearance on the carpet I was just thinking whether it would not pay me best to go away alone."

"Ah, you would have murdered her as you murdered Ora? Have a care. I can guess where she is to be found; and her safety is assured, since this time I shoot first. You cannot make up your mind but what I will pull trigger a shade the sooner. And yet—you know that only to save life would I do it. I shudder at the thought. If you had not taught me the possibility I would not have believed that it could be done."

"But you are alive and kicking; and the divine Ora—with whom at one time I must confess I was desperately in love—is still lingering. If I mistake not she and Abel Kain had plotted together to secure the fortune which should be Ilma's—and mine."

"Living! Where? How? But this is another of the lies with which your life is linked."

"On my soul, no! I only heard her voice, but since you have risen from the dead there is no reason why she should not be flesh and blood. In my right senses I would not harm a hair of her handsome head, though I did try to secure her immediate immortality when I found that you were too much for me in the courts of Cupid. Again I tell you, if there is any fraud going she is the one to look for; and Abel Kain is a partner in the play. But that is foolish advice, only given to make you feel bad. Of course, we know when this interview is over you will be looking for nothing, unless it is Cerberus, and the gates that he is supposed to be guarding. Come, now! Why waste further words? You are going to give me a chance for my life. I can see that plainly enough. Let us get into position; you can have the honor of giving the word; and then we can fire away. We hate each other heartily enough—all on account of a woman—and life would hardly be worth living for the one if the other was still alive. I give you a chance, you see. Speak quick: Is it accepted or not?"

"I can make no terms with a mad-dog. One last chance I give you. Throw up your hands and walk away without another word. Hesitate, and the end is here, and now."

It was noticeable that Billy Binks was no longer the same man. Weakened though he was by his wound, he was taller and straighter, and his voice had a positive ring that was widely different from that of the broken old man who had been quietly biding his time in Oro. If he had been in hiding then he had evidently determined to drop all fear now. Yet he hesitated to put all to the fatal hazard; and meantime Horace Merton was making up his mind. Suddenly his thumb went back.

And at that moment a woman darted between them, and threw up either outstretched arm.

"Hold!" she cried.

"There has been enough of bloodshed and attempted murder! Horace Merton, let me warn you. There are other avengers on the trail, and if you came off scot free here they would sooner or later reach your life if you lingered. Go while it is yet time."

The voice was a voice of her own that as yet had but seldom been heard in Oro; but the face and figure were those of Minnie, of the Golden Goat. If she looked older—so old that Abel Kain would not have recognized her—it was because disguise had been thrown to the winds, and whether as Minnie, or as Ramah, or as the Ora of the past, she stood between these two men.

"I am not so sure of that," interposed still another voice; and Mr. Jackson came forward from the shaft at her back, from which other figures were also emerging.

"Heaven knows that Cool Charlie Jackson had sins enough to answer for; and when one of this man's crimes is thrown at him as his

own it seems as well that it should not go by till it is answered for by him, either here or in a court of law. When the indictment has been heard I think I shall have to ask, what shall be done with him?"

Mr. Jackson spoke with easy confidence; but for once without due respect for the possibilities of the case, or the least idea that there might be others on the spot.

"It's not your say-so, pard," coolly said a voice which he recognized as belonging to the man at the Casino who had given the name of Happy Jack.

At the same time half a dozen dark figures rose up from the shadows in which they had been stalking their game. It was the speaker who held his revolver at the ear of Mr. Jackson, while a second man menaced Billy Binks, and two others threw themselves upon the *ci-devant* Colonel Snow, and, aided by the surprise, bore him to the ground.

"Sorry ter interrupt ary private confidences, but ther fact are that we hev biz with this gent, an' we don't do no waitin', but take him whar an' when we kin ketch him. An' ez it are not likely thet much will be said about it tell we are off an' away, we might be willin' ter explain jest ter satisfy yer minds. Ther elegant gerloot war captain ov ez fine a gang ov agents ez ever held up a coach, thet swore by him, good er bad, an' war willin' ter die fur him any day in ther year. When they got a whimper ov it thet he war goin' ter sell 'em out they couldn't b'lieve it hardly, an' they let him bluff 'em out, an' swore by him all ther harder. But that same night he d'livered his goods. Leastwise, ther 'tectives come down on 'em, an' ef they hedn't bin pertik'ler wide awake it would bin a clean scoop. That's whar I got my arm in a sling, an' two er three pards a last sickness. Thar's a law on our books bearin' on that subject, an' we are goin' ter try him. After we git through with him it'll be your say-so pards, but not afore. Sorry ter insist; but onless you knuckle under we'll hev, ter take yer weepins an' leave yer all tied up hyer till we git away with his luggage. How is it, peace er war? An' recom-mem-ber thet we are a not very pleasant party ter deal with."

"An' while they're debatin' ov it we kin be movin' ov yer off," added another of the men, who had twisted Horace Merton from his feet. "Sorry ter haff ter do it, capt'n, fur yer know yer saved my life onc't, but I can't go back on ther boys. They're a savin' of it all ther time, an' when I knowed yer sold us out, ez I told yer I would, I giv' yer up ter jestice, an' offered ter be one ov its ministers after my 'umble fashion. You kin walk ef yer wants to, tell we git yer in ther saddle; but ef it goes ag'in ther grain we kin kerry yer jest ez well."

"Off with him, some ov you!" ordered Happy Jack, not caring that more of this kind of talk should be heard. "This gang don't seem to be willing to come ter terms, an' we may ez well hold 'em to their vittals tell we make sure of him. You can have ten minutes' start, and if they can catch on after that we d'serve ter lose him."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A FAMILY COUNCIL.

"THERE is no use to organize pursuit this side of Oro, and if we say that it is to rescue a man like Colonel Snow—begging your pardon, Miss Merton, since it seems that he is really a relation—I am afraid Oro would sternly refuse to go on the war-path, unless for the purpose of assisting at the obsequies. Rest easy, now. If I know anything about the nature of those men, your vengeance will be complete."

So said Mr. Jackson when Happy Jack had drawn off the moiety of his forces who had been holding the Gent from Jaybird and the others in check. And the young lady looked helplessly around. After all, when vengeance was near, it was not a pleasant thing to contemplate.

"True," she answered, in an awe-struck tone. "It is dreadful to see him left to their untender mercies; but what else could we do?"

It may be as well to explain how it was that Mr. Jackson and the rest of his party came to be on the spot at that critical moment.

When the discovery was made that Daniels had left them cooped up in the lower drift, possibly to die, there was an unpleasant sensation. Everybody had the worst opinion of the ex-road-agent, though the young lady was best of all acquainted with his previous record. If he had simply been attracted away by something which seemed to demand his attention, why had he closed the way to the upper air? At the dry remark in regard to the possibility of his never coming back Miss Maud covered her face with her hands and cowered back. For only a moment or so there was a silence, in which could only be heard the beating of several hearts; but the interval seemed almost an hour.

Then there was another sound above, as the stone was once more raised, and as Mr. Jackson stepped forward with his pistol hand raised they heard a voice above them:

"An' are yez there, Mr. Jackson? Sure, an' it's no joke av a watch ye set me to, but, be the

powers, Oi kipt it up till I thought it wor toime ter ask for ither orders."

"Dennis it is. Good boy! I might have known that you would be around when you were needed. You told me once that you knew a point or two about the old Alcazor, and I begin to think you were not far off the truth. Where you got them I could not understand; but if you have any more of them suppose you shell them out."

"Joost wait a bowly minn't. Oi'm not so sure ye wants me to rev'ale me knowledge afour all the prisint company. Misther Kain might pass; but Oi dhraw the loine at Swate William."

Behind Mr. Jackson and his present charge came the two mentioned, and the man from Jaybird was recalled to himself.

"Sure enough! I don't suppose, Mr. Kain, that you have any further use for us, and I am pretty sure we have none for you. If you are wise you will retire the way you came, and say nothing of the facts in the abduction case. We shall then keep silent, and Oro will be saved the trouble and expense of a necktie party. And when you go, take Sweet William along with you. He and I are not friendly, and if he lingered I might be tempted to down him for keeps."

With a growl of assent Mr. Kain withdrew. He did not believe that his adventure could be kept quiet; and it certainly would not help his cause with Miss Minnie, of the Golden Goat, with whom he was not even yet entirely disenchanted.

When the two were gone Dennis lost no time in coming to an explanation; and, briefly, he told of his picking up Saintly Sam on the street and taking him to his quarters, and how Sam had confided to him certain papers that had been given to his keeping some years before by a man to whom he had been indebted for his life. The man was desperately wounded at the time, and expected to die, so that the papers he then wrote seemed almost like a voice from the grave.

Though Sam was in less danger of dying than he thought, he had said that he did not care to risk the loss of the papers altogether, and so handed them to Dennis as a man he could trust. Under almost like circumstances they had been given to him.

And when Maud ran these papers hurriedly over she saw there a revelation such as she had not dreamed of. If this story was true, then the man who slew Daniel Merton was his own brother; and it was on account of the jealousy which for some time had existed, in regard to a woman whom either would have married, though she smiled on both. Perhaps she was a coquette, but if Merton was to be believed, her heart was really his. It had been a shock to him to meet his brother at all, but when he knew that he was also a lover of the woman whom he loved, he suspected that there would be trouble in the future, and prepared somewhat for it. Horace never knew where he was located, nor the name under which he was known among his mining acquaintances. These, indeed, he had concealed from the woman he had loved, and visited at intervals, as well as from the brother he feared.

This, and much more she glanced at, and when they sought the upper air the woman was debating in her mind what punishment was harsh enough for the man who had befooled her and murdered her father. No wonder that she was not utterly crushed when she saw the outlaws carry him away to satisfy their own ideas of justice. She was sure then that he was to vanish from her sight, and she was to see him no more.

Mr. Jackson was the man who felt like raging; but he knew when the game was against him, and threw up his cards in silence, though he did a power of thinking while he was a prisoner, and his late employer was being carried off. He had no answer to the question of the young lady, and so remained silent.

Billy Binks was silent, too. He folded his arms, and looked from one woman to the other, uncertain what to say, and waiting for one of them to speak.

"Yes, it is Ora," said the one who had rushed between the outstretched arms of the brothers.

"I sought to avenge your death, but it was a long trail, with many mistakes. So much the better, perhaps, since I find you living. The knowledge that you had left a letter with Saintly Sam brought me here, but from him I learned nothing. I confided somewhat in Japhet Gigson, and he promised his help. I am afraid that he confided in turn in Abel Kain, who saw me as I seemed and not as I was. With a female friend we carried on a witches' cabal, so to speak; and in inquiring about others never forgot to seek for knowledge in regard to you. It was in that way I had once met with a relative of yours, one Lawrence Lorrimer. I believe that at another time I confounded with him the woman who came to me in his garb, but who was really your daughter—as hot upon the scent for vengeance as I."

"My daughter! Wait! Are you sure? It is years since I saw her, yet if she had not been in company with Horace I might have believed."

He turned to the younger woman, and devoured her with his glance, and she, in open-mouth wonder stared at the dead-alive, whose

identity she had, in spite of everything, but just learned. Then she fell at his feet in a dead faint.

As Mr. Jackson had taken quite a hand in the clearing up of what he was pleased to term the mystery of the lower drift, he was admitted, much to his apparent delight, into the family conference held for the general explanation of the different mistakes and cross-purposes which still bothered them. For the reader who has been looking between the lines no lengthy extract from the chronicles will be necessary.

For some years after the attempt on his life which was so nearly successful, Daniel Merton had been out of his mind, more or less, and had thought nothing of his family, and little of the woman whom he and his brother had both professed to love and whom he believed to be dead. When Sainly Sam was compelled to leave Hard Pan on account of a scrape over the gambling table, he took with him the letters that had been intrusted to his keeping until the "right person" should come to claim them. He was sure that Daniels would die, but believed that provision had been made for him as long as he would last, so that when it was safe he did not return; and he never asked questions, or he might have found out that the wounded man had wandered away, and his fate was unknown. When Daniels returned to the place where he had made his strike, he scarcely knew it; and it certainly did not know him. He was still but partially recovered, and went about getting back his own in a roundabout manner characteristic of his condition. How he succeeded, and how he left a notice for the benefit of that daughter he at last remembered, the reader knows.

For some years Maud—or, Ilma Maud, as her father more frequently called her—was uncertain of his fate, and knew not where to look for trace, even if the means had been at hand. At length, accompanied by her cousin, Lawrence Lorrimer, she began the search, and they were really put upon the trail by her uncle, the meetings with whom have already been sufficiently indicated, though there was one thing caused confusion in his mind, since he had never seen the two together. When Lorrimer, through an unfortunate accident, was shut out for a time from active participation in the search, the thought struck her that she would be better able to continue it herself if she donned his clothing, since, through a strong resemblance, she would be almost able to deceive those who knew them best. As an amateur gymnast she had learned the use of her muscles, and was equal to the use of a revolver when necessary. With the aid of a life-preserver she had, on several occasions, held her own in the mixed society of such places as the Ready John. At Hard Pan they had been seen by Ora, who learned of their quest.

They were on the same trail as that followed by her, but it seemed useless to reveal herself, since they would not understand, and might suspect. When she was acting as Ramah, and was visited by Ilma, she was deceived, but expecting a visit, had prepared herself with something of the same material she had got ready for Mr. Jackson, whom she had identified as the Cool Charlie who had been at the mine with Daniels the night before he had started on his last visit to Hard Pan, which resulted so disastrously.

And Mr. Jackson had a little story to tell, which he did very frankly. He had been interested in the appearance of a young lady who then mysteriously disappeared. With his usual freshness he endeavored to put himself on her trail, without suspecting that he had any other interest in it. Chance finally brought him to Oro; and from that time on the reader knows how he fared. Had not the true explanation of things come in due time, he might have perished at the hands of the young lady when he found her. At times she was very much in earnest.

But what use to go over all the ground, so much of which has been fairly covered? The most important thing which Mr. Jackson discovered during the council was that the real Lorrimer had recovered, abandoned the search for a man and a treasure which began to seem rather mythical, and had gone back East to a young lady, the light of whose eyes he could no longer do without.

"Humph!" thought the Gent from Jaybird. "I forgive the witch her suspicions, since it seems that she is not a half-bad sort after all, and that it is likely we will be members of the same family before long. I have found my affinity at last, and I suspect that she knows it; but a little wooing will be in order."

How that wooing prospered the reader can guess when told that, six months later, Mr. Jackson was a married man, and the first and favorite name of his wife was Ilma.

Abel Kain, who was a money-maker by nature, got over his passion and his chagrin when he found that Oro knew little and cared less for the fancy he had taken to a woman who made up young but who was older than himself. He had counted something on a treasure when the mystery he knew she was seeking to unravel

should be solved, and was inclined to bless Giggson for the half-way confidences which had drawn him on, but he never laid claim to the Dandy Belle, and for the future he gave the fair sex a wide berth.

Sweet William found it convenient to leave Oro without stating which way he was going, but his loss was not mourned. Sainly Sam recovered, and after some urging accepted a handsome reward from Merton. He had not many virtues, but his word to a pard could be relied on.

And Dennis, the irrepressible, is not far from Mr. Jackson, wherever he may wander. As a general thing, he has not much to say for himself, but he has the valuable faculty of always being on hand just when most wanted.

THE END.

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